

IBSEN
AND THE
DRAMA

BY
ZANONI

HENRIK IBSEN

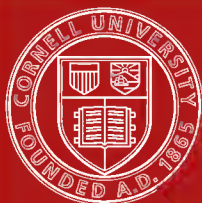


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IBSEN AND THE DRAMA

CHAPTER I.

IBSEN'S POSITION IN FACT AND FANCY.

THE great misconception that commonly prevails with regard to the dramas of Ibsen furnishes us with our apology for this work. For although the report of them has by this time reached the ears of almost everyone, the various opinions which they have evoked are so confused and irreconcilable that their real nature must still be far from being generally known, and the unassisted enquirer, in attempting to disentangle the truth concerning them from the meshes in which it is now confined, is likely to become hopelessly perplexed. Under these circumstances a clear presentment of their case would seem to be much needed, in order that they may be set in their proper light before the disinterested

public. Accordingly, we propose to show what is the true position which Ibsen occupies in relation to the modern drama, our object being not so much to supply a critical study as, by removing false impressions and arousing interest, to induce people to make themselves acquainted with his works at first hand, which is the only way to acquire a real understanding of them. And at the outset it may be well to state that we speak more particularly of his later, and what are known as his social dramas, for it is these that are usually referred to when mention is made of Ibsen.

Now it is unfortunate that even up to the present time there exists an unreasonable prejudice on this subject—for surely no one will contend that it rests on any sound basis—which puts us in the position of one who, before he begins to speak, has his audience predisposed against him. Those who are ready enough to admit that they have too slight a knowledge of these dramas to express any opinion of them, would probably, if they were to question themselves, be obliged to confess that they have already passed at least a tacit condemnation upon them in their own minds. It would seem that the general idea of Ibsen is not so much undefined as it is erroneous. People have been content to acquiesce in that estimate of him which is merely the expression of the

fluctuating tone of current opinion, and, instead of examining his works for themselves, they have not hesitated to accept without question the *ex parte* statements of his opponents.

But there are many who represent themselves as feeling no desire to discover whether the claims put forward on behalf of Ibsen are justifiable or not, and pretend that such questions do not possess the slightest interest for them. They affect to regard the whole matter as outside their province, and as one too common and profane for them to touch, and treat the supporters of either side with the superb indifference of the Grand Turk, when, according to Ibsen's own account, he said of the Emperor of Austria and the King of France,—“I don't care whether the pig eats the dog, or the dog the pig.”

If such people would only be as good as their word, and preserve the neutrality which they profess in this matter, there would not be much reason to complain. But in point of fact we find that they have done nothing of the sort. For their attachment for preconceived notions, which they dignify by the name of common sense, causes them to adopt a hostile attitude towards these dramas, of which they themselves would be the first to contemptuously acknowledge that they know nothing whatever. These are that

"compact majority," whose ignorance and indifference are greater obstacles to truth than the open attacks of its enemies.

Among the causes which have contributed to the rise of this feeling of prejudice, we may mention in particular the enthusiasm of indiscreet partisans, which has deterred many from approaching this subject who might perhaps have become interested in it, had their attention been directed to the dramas themselves rather than to the characters of those engaged in discussing them. Thus Ibsen has come to be regarded as the very personification of all that unmeaning literature, or what passes for such, which has been inflicted upon the present age, whose profound depths none but the cultured may hope to fathom, and whose subtle excellencies people are so weary of having held up to their admiration. Not having sufficient leisure to make enquiry for themselves into the nature of such works, they have unconsciously been influenced by the information they have received regarding them from sources commonly looked upon as authentic, and when they have grown discouraged in vainly trying to discover those exotic graces which never in fact existed, mistrustful of laying any blame on authors who are so well spoken of, they have come to the conclusion that the fault is their own, and that these things

are only to be appreciated by the privileged few who have had the good fortune of being initiated into their mysteries. The state of works of this description resembles that of new-born infants, who have as yet developed no character at all, being so elementary that they cannot be brought under the category of good or bad, and are best passed over in silence. He who would fain expose their defects will be at a loss how to proceed, for he will find nothing tangible to lay hold upon. The authors of these ætherial compositions have soared to such giddy heights that they have attained a region where they are beyond the reach of attack. After the example of the guardian deities who were wont to deliver the heroes of old from falling into the hands of their enemies by shedding a mist upon them which caused them to become invisible to mortal eyes, it would seem that those who have given these nebulous productions to the world have purposely made them unintelligible, in order to screen their defects. Criticism is paralysed before them. They are impregnable in their obscurity.

But in Ibsen the exasperated public seems to have found a kind of scapegoat, on whom it has laid all that blame which it could not fix on the guilty. The real offenders have escaped, and have left the innocent to suffer for their faults. Like

great drums which, though empty within, drown by their loud rattle the strains of the softer music, they have deceived people so often by their false and hollow pretensions that they have made them become unduly cautious, and whenever any work is recommended to them which has not as yet received the hall-mark of general approval, they look upon it with the greatest suspicion. Their failures do not only affect their own credit, but they prejudice the public against those who come after them. They maybe compared to indifferent sportsmen, whose ceaseless firing, while it does no good to themselves, renders abortive the well-calculated plans of others who are less noisy and obtrusive, so that all alike meet with the same bad fortune. For, however much skill a person may possess, it will not avail him when he is deprived of the opportunity of exercising it.

It is curious to see Ibsen associated with such company, and those who indiscriminately place him in the same class with these authors show clearly that they have never made his acquaintance. Ibsen's fame has legitimately evolved itself out of years of opposition, while that of these others will in most cases be found to be of that mushroom growth which depends on the ephemeral support of some select coterie, and vanishes as suddenly as it springs up.

But it will suffice here to state that a marked simplicity pervades these social dramas. There are no obscure allusions in them, and none but ordinary words are employed. They have been made easily accessible by means of good translations, so that there is no need to say any more on this head, for whoever doubts these statements has within his power the means of assuring himself that they are well founded.

The truth is that people generally have not come to consider Ibsen seriously. He has very few open supporters, and even of these few there are many, as we have already pointed out, who, by their ill-timed advocacy, only bring discredit upon the works they seek to vindicate. The more prudent prefer to keep their own counsel and wait, knowing that a growing minority by its greater vital force must eventually triumph over an effete and decreasing majority. For now, if anyone, when Ibsen's name is mentioned, should venture to put in a word in his favour, or to deprecate the thoughtless disapproval which it is usual for him to meet with from those who have never made his acquaintance through his dramas, he would straightway be set down as a person of peculiar views, and for some strange reason would probably procure for himself the title of "Ibsenite;" as if one who simply does justice to the merit of another man's

work, thereby merges his own individuality in his and renounces his right to independent thought. When a person confesses to an admiration for the works of Shakspeare we do not thereupon brand him as a "Shaksperite," In the same way we hear Ibsen's followers contemptuously alluded to as "the faithful few." But before a writer's reputation has become firmly established, the support of his followers, few though they be, is for this very reason the more likely to be genuine, being based on no other foundation than a study of his works. For since they have nothing to gain by giving their allegiance, but only bring ridicule upon themselves, it is not to be supposed that they do so from ulterior considerations. No doubt, among those who are always ready to seize upon whatever happens to be the latest craze, there are some who applaud these dramas because they hear them talked about, in order that they may make themselves conspicuous and be thought original. But how shall injustice be avoided if a man is to be condemned on no better grounds than the vagaries of his professed followers?

Those who really wish to form a right decision on this case, considering it solely as to its merits, will do well to disregard the utterances of the more demonstrative combatants of either side. Whoever prolongs an argument with an opponent

who is not conversant with his subject, in the hope of converting him to his own views, undertakes a disheartening task, for the more ignorant a man is, the less able he is to feel the force of the reasoning opposed to him. A person who embarks upon such a discussion, not only cannot hope to derive profit from it by the mutual interchange of opinions, but, as it is ever the policy of such as are not sure of their ground to cover their ignorance with the multitude of words, he is in danger of being overborne by a torrent of empty verbiage; as Sadi says in the *Gulistan*,—"No wonder if his spirit flag; the nightingale is cooped up in the same cage with the crow."

But all who are willing to lay aside previous misconceptions, and to approach this matter in a sober and unbiassed spirit, we now invite to a consideration of its real facts, for, to use Bacon's words,—“As for the first notions of the mind, we suspect all those that the understanding, left to itself, procures, nor ever allow them till approved and authorised by a second judgment.” If we adopt a proper method of enquiry we will not be long in discovering that the appearance of Ibsen's social dramas, even when they are only viewed externally, far from being so unprepossessing as it is commonly represented, is rather such as to raise a presumption in their favour. This external view,

however, only serves as a preliminary to their internal examination, by which alone we shall be qualified to finally decide.

“Nothing without sufficient reason,” said Leibnitz, and in spite of the misfortunes of Voltaire’s *Candide* it is an axiom we will do well to accept. What then are the existing facts with regard to Ibsen? It is indisputable that at the present moment he enjoys a great reputation, which is not confined within the limits of his native land, but has spread throughout Europe. Who now living, we are bold to ask, has a greater? There are some, we admit, whose names within the boundaries of their own country would stand higher than his, but, when we extend our enquiry so as to embrace the whole world of letters, we shall have to confess that the first position belongs to Ibsen. His works have made their way into all European communities, and especially his social dramas, which have been successfully performed not only in his own country, but also in England, France, and Germany, before popular audiences, which are not wont to tolerate anything difficult or vague. That these plays, when produced in translated form, before people of different nations, and of diverse tastes and customs, should yet be received by them all with genuine favour, is no small matter, and speaks much for the humanising influence of literature.

Like a piece of gold which never loses its intrinsic value, they circulate and pass currency throughout Europe, while the works of others are for the most part but as paper money, which is valueless outside the country in which it is issued.

Having such ascertained facts as these before us, we cannot lightly pass them over as possessing no significance. We may attribute them to a mistaken enthusiasm or a perverted judgment, if we are satisfied that there are sufficient grounds for so doing, but an adequate explanation of some kind we are bound to give. The scientist patiently investigates the cause of every phenomenon; and here, too, we must take care that our reasons fully justify the facts.

We constantly hear it said that there are no authors of real eminence living at the present day, though perhaps there never was a time when they have been so much sought after, or have had such rich rewards held out to them, so that it would seem that, in this age at least, if one should happen to arise, he would not have to complain of neglect. Yet here before our eyes we have what we ask for, if we could but see it. The people of to-day, like the Athenians of old, are for ever making the enquiry, "Is there anything new?" but their enquiry is only superficial, and they remain in ignorance of the important issues that

are being contested in front of them. They only see what is outwardly striking, but have no insight to perceive the true meaning of passing events, and while they eagerly grasp at the vain and fleeting shadows, they let the realities escape. It is no wonder, then, if they become restless and dissatisfied, and draw contrasts to themselves between the past and the present, to the disadvantage of the latter. "The last generation," we may suppose them to say, "had a Goethe who was the voice that gave expression to the thoughts which agitated the minds of the men of his time, but there is no one like him living now." And it is not for want of looking that they do not discover what they seek, for they turn their eyes this way and that way, and, indeed, everywhere except in the right direction. If, before looking in other places, they were to first search thoroughly among the things which they possess, they might save themselves the trouble of laboriously hunting after that which they have already. In making the voyage of life they sit in the stern of the vessel, straining their eyes with looking backwards over the space already traversed, and they have no clear mental vision to see for themselves, at the moment of their coming into view, the fresh objects that are continually arising in front, but wait till they have been discovered by others before they will

regard them. Thus Goethe is certainly more widely known and appreciated now than he was in his lifetime. Accordingly, a lament similar to that we have supposed may be made by their descendants in the next generation, except that, as their fathers referred back to Goethe, it is quite possible that they may refer back to Ibsen. For surely there is no epoch that is altogether sterile. Are we to think, because the old authors have passed away, that there are to be "no more cakes and ale"? And if it be the case that there are authors of conspicuous merit now in existence, we should lose no time in endeavouring to make their acquaintance, and instead of esteeming them the less because they are contemporary with us, or because time has not yet encircled their memory with the halo of fame, we should rather feel the more attracted towards them, inasmuch as they are representative, not of a past age, but of that in which we live. For, to say the least, how much more interesting it is to follow an author's work from its beginning until it reaches maturity, examining each new development as it arises, and living our life, as it were, side by side with his!

It is a mistake to suppose that it amounts to the same thing whether we make our acquaintance with Ibsen now, or postpone it to some future time. For everything a proper season is appointed.

We have now an opportunity of entering with zest into the life that is germinating around us, but this is only offered once, and those who do not take advantage of it when it is within their reach will be left behind to drag out a laggard existence among the dry bones of the dead, like Faust in his "narrow Gothic chamber." This is the distinction which was drawn by the Hellenes when they said that it was not enough to live, but that one ought to live well, that is, not to be satisfied with a mere existence, but to make the most of life, developing all its latent energies and giving full scope to its powers. Let us, therefore, approach this question while it is still being debated, and not wait until it has been decided.

But, if we would do this, we must no longer delay. It is high time to move forward if we do not wish to be left behind, for the tide of Ibsen's fame is advancing in great force, and has broken through all the barriers which have been vainly erected to check its course. How far it will yet extend remains to be seen, but it is evident that it has not yet reached its limit. Whoever does not take his place in the ranks while the battle is being fought, but waits to see which way the issue inclines, and then steals in like a camp-follower after the victory to share in spoils he never helped to gain, may find himself in the position of the bat

in the fable of *Æsop*, which, siding first with the birds and then with the beasts, was finally rejected by both. Moreover, if all refused to pin their faith to works which authority has not yet marked with the stamp of its approval, how could they ever become known at all? A person who looks at the name of the dramatist in order to decide the question whether he shall approve or condemn the drama, cannot lay claim to the possession of any literary taste. On the other hand, those who recognise the merit of a work while its author's title to fame is still a matter of dispute, can take credit to themselves for their discernment; and their commendation, however scanty, having been bestowed when encouragement was needed, will be acceptable; whereas, when once the seal has been set to his reputation, it will be a matter of indifference to him whether any particular person subscribes to it or not. The voice of the individual is lost in the general tumult of applause, and whoever has encomiums heaped upon him from every side has no longer the means of distinguishing genuine praise from the voice of flattery. No one can honestly praise a work unless he has felt its merit for himself. When men pin their faith to a work only because it is approved by others, it is not unnatural to conclude that, if others had condemned it, they would have done so also. To

whichever side the weight of opinion inclines, they give their fickle adherence. They have no real perception of the beauties they pretend to admire. It is not suggested that, because a work bears authority's stamp of approval, it is, therefore, less worthy of our consideration. The use of the stamp is that it attracts the attention to that which might otherwise have been passed over. It invites enquiry. It does not demand acquiescence.

But it is said that, as the truth never changes, so what was good in a past age is good also in this. What need, then, of hastening to examine these things while they are new? If they be good and sound, then they will keep, and will even improve by becoming mellowed. For time is the great purgative of error, and when the vexed questions have become settled, and the turbid elements calm and clear, their true nature will be better seen. Let the strong face the storm of the wind-lashed waves and the stress of the angry weather; it is best for frail barks to wait till the troubled waters have subsided before putting out to sea.

Now all this appears very plausible, but we will endeavour to show that it is misleading. For though truth in the abstract is unalterable, yet truths are always assuming fresh aspects, like the glasses of a kaleidoscope, which, while they sever-

ally remain all the time the same, are continually arranging themselves into new groups and forming fresh combinations of colour. The thing itself is constant, but its emanations are variable. If we do not catch the delicate tints at the moment they arise, they fade away and elude our notice altogether, and the pleasing variety of light and shade is reduced to a dull monotony. When the bloom of its freshness is departed, we can no longer inhale the fragrance of the flower. But we find that when ideas have been newly originated most people regard them with suspicion; yet these same ideas, when they have become trite and antiquated, they accept without question; as Ibsen himself says,—“What sort of truths are those that the majority is wont to take up? Truths so full of years that they are decrepit. When a truth is as old as that it is in a fair way to become a lie;” and again,—“A normally-constituted truth lives—let me say—as a rule seventeen or eighteen years, seldom longer. But truths so stricken in years are always shockingly thin. And yet it is only then that a majority takes them up and recommends them to society as wholesome food.” But there is no satisfaction in living upon the labours of others, and the food which has been worked for is relished the most, and therefore whoever is possessed of any enterprise will strike out for himself and seek for

fresh fields of investigation, instead of encroaching upon those already occupied, for he cannot hope to gain credit for the independent discovery of that with which the world is already acquainted. When ideas have become common property they no longer possess the same interest. It happens with them as with the fashions, which change every spring. Those which the leaders introduce are at last adopted by all, but by that time their originators have abandoned them for others.

But let it not be supposed that we are treating antiquity with irreverence, or that we concern ourselves only with the present, and have no regard for the past. On the contrary, we urge everyone to revert, not half way only, but right back to the times when those men lived, whose works, like ancient monuments, stand out from among its ruins, and to study their views as they expressed them, and not as misinterpreted by their professed followers. For it is the custom with these, since they cannot depend upon their own merit for success, to garnish their pages with illustrious names, that they may catch from them a kind of reflected glory. Not only do they contribute nothing themselves to the advancement of human knowledge, but they bring wholesome doctrines into discredit by perverting and narrow-

ing them down to fit in with their own views. They resemble some tenacious creeper that chokes with its pernicious overgrowth the tree from which it derives its support, till, when it has sapped its vitality, both are involved in the same downfall. In this way it comes about that the leaders of to-day are often thought to be at variance with the great men of the past. But the supposed antagonism will vanish if we examine their works for ourselves at first hand.

It will help us here to remember that words are first spoken, but written afterwards, and those who catch their tones as they fall from the speaker's lips understand them best. Thus all kinds of literature were originally oral, but now only the drama; for when the conditions of life became more complex, the necessity of another medium of expression was felt, and thus writing was invented, which enables the author to appeal to a larger public and to perpetuate his work beyond the period of a single generation. But it is useful to bear in mind what is the natural state of language. Our aim, then, should be to get as near as possible to the spoken word. For the waters of the river become purer the nearer we approach to its source. Where its stream is small and where few have penetrated, it runs bright and clear; but when it descends in broader volume among the dwellings of

men, it becomes contaminated from the pollutions which flow into it from them.

The degree of force, therefore, with which the meaning of any passage will be brought home to us will be greater or less, according to the nearness with which we approach to the age in which it was produced. For every successive year imports a change, not into the words themselves, but into the circumstances which surround them; and as we draw further and further away we see their meaning less and less distinctly, "ghosts" creep in between the lines, and other distorting influences intervene between us and them, till at last they appear to be of a nature quite the opposite to what they really are.

But since it is obvious that no one can literally live in any age but the present, if we wish to go back to any other time we must seek for some means of mentally placing ourselves in the circumstances then existing. Our own unaided vision is not sufficient; we require the help of a mental telescope to bring the distant objects close to hand, and this we have in the great works which have been handed down to us. For when we have saturated ourselves with them, we shall begin to find that the spirit of that distant period which they embody is not contrary to that of the present, though it manifests itself differently. On the

other hand, those generally received ideas which we had been before accustomed to regard as identical with those held by the great men of past time, we shall find to be so only in appearance ; while those newly promulgated by the foremost leaders of to-day, so far from being antagonistic to theirs, will prove to be thoroughly in accord with them. The old ideas are, in fact, the prototypes from which the new have sprung by a natural course of development, so that they are really the same ideas reproduced under altered conditions. For the key to the present lies hidden in the past, and the further our vision extends backwards, the further also will it be able to penetrate into the future. The leaders who stand in the fore-front to-day have but inherited the spirit of their predecessors in time past, and have the same enemies to contend against. Thus, by a strange irony, the very people who, in their blind zeal on behalf of the great men of ages gone by, vehemently attack all whose views do not outwardly conform with theirs, are the bitterest opponents of the cause which they so strenuously advocate. They are indeed attentive to pay honour to their memory and linger fondly by their tombs, but they neglect those now living who are carrying on the work which they began. It is not by a mere cherishing of great names, but by acquiring an understanding

of the works which have made them venerated, that we shall best show our reverence to antiquity. This was the thought in the mind of the old Roman when, foreseeing the long line of his successors who were to bring to perfection the work of which he was the father, he desired that none should weep for him or mourn over his grave, as though he would no longer have any part among the living, because he would still be heard speaking in the mouths of men of a later age.

We are therefore led to conclude that while the representative men of one period differ from those of another, there is yet no contradiction to be found between them. This variety was to have been expected rather than uniformity. It is by perceiving the harmony that subsists amid all this difference that the author is enabled to gather those materials out of which he constructs an entirely new work. For, since there is nothing which is altogether independent of its antecedents, every new work must bear some relation to those which have been given to the world before it. But no one can improve upon that which has already been carried to perfection. To attempt to retouch a masterpiece is worse than labour in vain. Accordingly, whoever has a true appreciation of another's work will feel too much respect for it to trespass in a department which

is not his own; but, while abstaining from meddling in the concerns of others, he will not neglect to gain instruction from everything which comes before him, and the material which he collects from all these varied sources he will forge in the furnace of his mind into a new creation, bearing no outward resemblance to anything which existed previously to it—in the same way as a chemist takes many elements and fuses them into one compound possessing properties totally different from those of any of its constituents, so that only those who know how to apply the proper tests are able to detect their presence.

The same work put into the hands of two people may produce in them quite opposite effects. The one gives a languid assent to all the opinions it expresses, because he knows they have already met with general approval, and contents himself with simply repeating these in his own way; while the other finds in it "thoughts that breathe and words that burn," which, as he revolves them in his mind, become transformed as by a magic power, and assume a new shape. The one belongs to the retrogressive party, the other to the progressive. For it is allowed to no one to stand idly by as a mere contemplative spectator, and watch the march of events without himself taking any part in them. Whether they be conscious of it or not,

all who are not advancing with them are setting obstacles in the way to clog and retard their progress. Throughout the whole realm of nature we see nothing that remains stationary; but as the "great globe itself" is continually revolving, so "all which it inherit" must keep moving in the one direction or the other. To join in the forward movement is not so very difficult, nor does it require any special ability. The chief thing that is needed is a receptive mind, that will not form a fixed decision until the evidence on both sides has been heard.

But there are some who are deterred from Ibsen because they think of him as a man with a mission, who is never entertaining, but has only heavy denunciations to bestow upon the world. They say, very justly, that they feel no desire to run after a dull teacher, or to go out of their way to add to the burdens they have already by listening to his impressive utterances. For people like to resort to an author of their own accord, not to be compelled to listen to him as a duty, and they will not voluntarily place themselves under a school-master. It is not enough that the views which a person sets himself up to proclaim should be sage and correct, but they must be set forth with a certain grace of style if he wishes to captivate his hearers, for he cannot wrest their attention by

force. He must attract them by a gentle persuasion, hold them enchained as willing prisoners by the charm of his manner, and send them away in better spirits than when they came. To arouse an interest is a necessary preliminary to giving instruction, as the ground must be ploughed before the seed can be sown; and whoever begins by chilling the feelings of his audience with frigid commonplaces will instil into them nothing but a wearisome disgust. Those who regard Ibsen in this light would speak of him in a tone similar to that of Werther, in one of his letters to his friend, where he writes,—“ You ask me if you shall send me books. My dear friend, I beseech you for the love of God relieve me from such a yoke. I need no more to be guided, agitated, heated. My heart ferments sufficiently of itself. I want strains to lull me, and I find them to perfection in my Homer.”

All this is excellent, but it is quite irrelevant if it be applied to Ibsen. It sounds strange to hear him charged with being dull, for that is the one thing he is not. Everyone may not approve of his mode of thinking, or be disposed to give an unqualified adherence to his views; but it must be acknowledged that they are clearly and tersely expressed. His page is invigorated with the freshness of life. In place of a tiresome affectation and

a continual straining after effect, we find naturalness, simplicity, and repose. We are not here following the practice of those who raise up an imaginary antagonist against themselves, in order that, by demolishing his arguments, they may the better establish their own. Imputations of this kind are constantly being made, and we are therefore obliged to take notice of them. However, as it would be a tedious and unprofitable task to attempt to refute all the charges which have been brought against Ibsen, and as we are unwilling to be drawn into interminable controversies, we will no longer engage in the distracting pursuit of these groundless objections, but will let this stand as a fitting sample of the rest. For the people who urge them never consider whether they are applicable, but are like those who plunge into a debate without understanding the point at issue. Finding so many of indifferent merit among the multitude of new authors who are ever pressing their claims upon their attention, they at last think it best to shelter themselves behind those of established reputation, and dismiss all others with such a remark as that with which Theocritus was repulsed by the men of his time,—“Homer is enough for everyone; who wants to hear any other?” But when they proceed in such an indiscriminate fashion, they cannot avoid including the deserving in their

sweeping condemnation, but make them suffer for the faults of others. If they had properly understood the great authors of the past, they would have been ready to welcome those of the present, instead of seeking to disparage them by drawing invidious comparisons; for, as we have tried to show, whoever best appreciates the old works will be the first to recognise the merits of the new. Moreover, they forget that such comparisons are often deceptive, for the things compared are not brought together upon equal terms.

That great opposition has been manifested towards Ibsen we readily admit. But this fact in itself will surely not excite surprise, for such has ever been the case at the outset with those who have exhibited a strong individuality, and there is doubtless many a one who would be glad of a share of the adverse criticism which has been so plentifully bestowed upon him. This opposition at least shows that there is something to oppose, and that his works are not so dull and meaningless as they have been represented. Indeed, we shall not discover anything in the works themselves to justify all these attacks, but the reasons for them are rather to be sought for in the characters of the persons who make them, because they find that the cap fits, so that their attacks are like so many testimonials to the keen insight of the man against

whom they are directed. It is just on account of Ibsen's dramas being so clear and forcible that they have somewhat rudely awakened this opposition, and have brought him into contact with the upholders of those moribund customs whose existence they threaten to put an end to altogether. His words are felt to proceed in their full force direct from the heart; their vigour has not been diminished by their having been passed through any intermediate process that they might accord with conventional forms, neither has their native freshness been sullied by their having been subjected to artificial restraints.

The truth and energy which these social dramas possess in themselves make them independent of praise or blame from without. No amount of outward hostility is able to alter their nature, neither can the most wilful misrepresentations affect their inherent and essential qualities. For as in spite of the persecution of Galileo the universe still continued to move, so, in spite of opposition, or rather because of it, Ibsen's reputation is steadily increasing year by year, and his works are growing more and more in general estimation. For they are not like fragile plants, nurtured in the artificial atmosphere of a conservatory, but resemble hardy trees, constantly exposed to the raging of the elements, which has not been able to stunt their growth, but

has only developed their innate strength. They carry in themselves the convincing proof of their own sincerity, without which no one can earn "an honest fame," but all whose works bear its impress must eventually triumph over all opponents.

There is therefore every reason to hope that the rays of truth will soon pierce through the stolid indifference of that "compact majority," which, even at this time of day, still regards Ibsen and his dramas with disfavour. For though, when viewed at a distance, this huge bulk of opposition presents an imposing exterior, yet, when we approach, we find nothing but a cloud-like structure without any real foundation. "Everything unknown is accounted great," says the proverb, but let not that air of mystery which is wont to surround a distant object deceive us into investing this opposition with too much importance; but let us go on, undeterred by any impalpable phantoms, to prove its actual nature, for it is always fallacious to judge by appearances. The enchantment which it has for beholders who view it from afar, vanishes before the approach of such as come right up to it. Its formidable aspect may keep the indolent mind from advancing further, but those who still press on will find that this lion in the way is chained. It overawes only because it is not faced.

CHAPTER II.

OBJECTIONS TO IBSEN'S DRAMAS EXAMINED.

BESIDES those who have unconsciously formed a wrong opinion of Ibsen, there are others, fewer in number, who understand very well the nature of his dramas, but being suspicious and afraid of their aims, they employ every artifice to keep the mass of mankind in ignorance of them, and have therefore formulated some specious objections which are the more deceptive because they have a show of truth, though they are in reality as baseless as the fabric of that effete society whose tottering pillars their advocates would fain stay up.

Such an one is that which they make when they allege that the social dramas of Ibsen are repulsive. Because he does not represent things as being better than they are, they take advantage of this to pervert his meaning as though he represented them as worse, and compare him with those who revel in unpleasant details in order to attract a certain class. But he certainly has not fallen into this opposite error. Everything that is of

human interest may be introduced into a drama, and by laying bare the evil the good is set off by contrast. "The sun," says Bacon, "though it passes through dirty places, yet remains as pure as before." When dangers, before unknown, are suddenly revealed to us by a piercing light, though they destroy our sense of security, they are at the same time the means of our reaching a position of safety ; but, when they are enveloped in the haze of romance, they escape our notice and we have not the power to evade them.

Those romances which carry us into an ideal and fanciful region only fill the mind with false notions which make it unfit to encounter the realities of life, and produce upon it a most unhealthy and enervating effect. For as the traitor within is more to be feared than the enemy without, the evils secreted in them are the more baneful because they are latent, and their insidious influence, though unsuspected, will none the less surely deprave the finer feelings.

But the social dramas of Ibsen, on the other hand, act as a wholesome and bracing tonic to the mind, inasmuch as, rigidly confining himself to the consideration of actual facts, he neither soars to the heights nor sinks into the depths, but remains in the midst of human affairs, remembering that "the proper study of mankind is man." For, seeing that

these evils exist, the author who wishes that his works should hold up a true mirror to nature cannot pretend to be oblivious of them. But Ibsen is not a mere railer at abuses, but he is first of all a dramatist, and knows his public too well to occupy himself with the darker side of life to the neglect of the brighter.

This whole matter has been so greatly exaggerated by those who thoroughly understand how much harm such accusations are likely to do him, that amongst those whose knowledge of his dramas is derived from hearsay only, there exists a quite unfounded opinion, which his opponents lose no opportunity to sedulously foster, that they are gloomy and depressing. But without ever having subjected them to an internal examination at all, a little reflection would make any reasonable person disinclined to believe that this is the case; for how then could they have excited the great and widespread interest which they undoubtedly have done? But it is said that these gruesome particulars are the very thing upon which Ibsen depends for success, and that they form the whole of his stock-in-trade which he exposes to attract the public. Yet, even admitting this to be true for the sake of argument, and supposing Ibsen to have permitted himself to indulge in every licence, he could never, relying upon this alone, have procured for his

dramas their present world-wide fame. Something further is required to account for so great a measure of success, and we find it in the peculiar charm and alluring fascination with which he has invested them.

The only reason which could possibly have given rise to such a mistaken opinion, is that, whenever Ibsen does treat of such matters, he does not pass them over lightly, but applies to them a radical treatment. The true cause of the malady does not escape him, but his sharp instruments probe beneath the surface down to its root. Those members which are diseased he does not scruple to cut away, but only that the rest may be preserved in health. There is no unnecessary handling of the subject; he examines it so far as he is obliged, in order to form a right conclusion, and no more.

Another such objection has been raised against Ibsen's dramas in attributing them with eccentricity. Here again a mountain has been made out of a molehill. A little strangeness may be experienced at the outset, inseparable from works originally composed in a language other than our own. But this feeling wears off on a further acquaintance, and beyond this we shall meet with nothing to trouble us. Thus the names of the characters may sound unusual to our ears; but to make this a

ground of complaint would be unreasonable. The literature of every country is distinguished by certain peculiar traits, which are to be felt rather than described. Apart from the differences of manner among authors individually, we can all appreciate certain national distinctions, which define an English from a French or German work. But these attract rather than repel, and constitute a pleasing novelty. For everyone is naturally acquainted with the literature of his own country, and is disposed to assert that it is better than every other. But no one should be content with only this amount of knowledge; for how possibly can he speak of his own country's literature as better, when he is ignorant of that with which he is comparing it?

But not to enter upon a profitless and endless discussion as to their respective merits, into which much feeling could not fail to be imported, let us consider how greatly we may amplify our range of knowledge by taking up other literatures. For even granting that our own excels all others when considered severally, yet there are many countries in the world possessing celebrated literatures, and their joint contributions would certainly outweigh all that any single country could throw into the scale; without taking into account the literatures of ancient times, which still survive though the

kingdoms under which they flourished have passed away. Again, no one literature stands by itself independent of the rest, but historical connections may be established between them all; and we cannot properly understand the part unless we see it in its relation to the whole.

Although our knowledge does not extend so far as to give us a familiarity with the languages of other peoples; yet, in an age when it is to be observed with satisfaction translations are so accessible, we can easily possess ourselves of the keys with which to unlock these hid treasures. The facilities which we now enjoy in this direction are much greater than those available in the last century; not but what they still leave much that could be desired. Even at the present time there are many well-known works from which we are debarred owing to the want of good translations; under which term we include only such as are idiomatic, and neither add to nor take from the sense of the original; for these alone are to be commended as being of any use.

Here, then, is an opening for one who, finding every mine of research exhausted, and every department of literature already overcrowded with eager aspirants, is at a loss where to bestow his labours. Instead of vainly expending his misdirected energies, he may turn them into a fresh path where

they will be profitably employed, and where there are few rivals to be encountered.

It would be well if the patient labours of the translator were more generally recognised, and if we were to hear less of those lost graces of the original. For, seeing that this loss cannot be denied, it is useless reiterating it; and however much it be deplored, it is evident that it cannot be remedied. But as it is only partial and not total, it affords no excuse for neglect; we should make the best use of the things which we have.

But the gravest objection of all is made when it is alleged that Ibsen's dramas are falsely so called, that they exhibit none of the characteristics and conform to none of the rules of drama, but that their author has cast them into this form because he found it a convenient vehicle for expressing his thoughts. Outwardly they appear to be dramas; in reality they are essays in dramatic form.

This objection, if it could be sustained, would, as we would be the first to insist, be fatal to Ibsen's reputation. If it be admitted, his claim to literary merit at once fails, and he sinks to the level of a mere reformer. For there are the greatest differences between a drama and a mere essay or story, all of which are centred in this principle, that the true dramatist composes with an audience, and not readers, before his mind's eye. Many who

have succeeded in almost every other department of literature have yet failed in this, which, it is generally acknowledged, calls for faculties of a special kind, and demands the exercise of the highest skill.

Let us consider, therefore, what are the leading characteristics and rules of drama, and then examine these works to see whether they are in accord with them. And first of all we wish to point out that it is not permitted to the dramatist to trifle with his subject in dilettante fashion. The treatment he adopts must not be discursive. It is not enough for him—

“as with a swallow's wings,
Lightly to touch the surfaces of things,”

but he must have power to grasp what is essential and to disregard everything else.

The drama may include the greatest variety of matters, but these must all be bound together by inter-connections, so that none of them can be taken away without being missed, and no others added to their number without proving an encumbrance. Also, in every drama there should be one fundamental thought, to which all the subsidiary incidents should converge as to their common centre. Accordingly, not only must the several parts be connected with each other, but

they must all have some bearing upon this central thought, and help to bring about one result. Moreover, the whole, thus constituted, must not be diffused over too great a space, but must be confined within such limits as to admit of its being comprehended in one view. This unity is the first essential of the drama.

Now it is confidently submitted that each of these social dramas will be found to contain one root idea, to which all their shifting scenes and changing events are subservient and tend to elucidate. In selecting out of the crude mass of material at his disposal what is fittest for carrying out this main purpose to which all the parts are subordinated, Ibsen shows consummate skill. Our interest is evoked from the very first, and, the action not being unduly prolonged, it does not flag at the finish. He never violates the rules of drama by going out of his way in order to descant upon a favourite theme. Episodes will be found, but not digressions. There is no superfluous verbiage, but all the incidents lead up to the one consummation, and every part bears a just relation to the symmetrical whole. Each drama is complete in itself. We feel, when the end is reached, that exactly enough has been said; that to add any more would only have the effect of disarranging what has been already put together, and that

to cut out any part would cause the whole structure to collapse. Ibsen's dramas are not made up of a mere string of speeches delivered with the unvarying monotony of a dry discourse. His dialogue is concise and animated. He does not invite our attention to a bare narration of events, but carries us along in a varying succession of actions, and though we are all the time unconscious of being taught any lesson, we discover, at the fall of the curtain, that we have realised his meaning with a degree of intensity to which we could only have attained by having our interest absorbed in the situations developed before our eyes by living characters.

But while in a properly-constructed drama all the incidents tend to one result, there is a method to be observed in arriving at it. They must not be heaped confusedly together, but must be marshalled in due order. There are certain things that are fitted to be included at one stage in the development of the action which would be out of place at another. Each matter, then, must be relegated to its own compartment, lest by running against something else it prove a disturbing element; or, to say the same thing in different words, a drama must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

When we apply this canon to the dramas of

Ibsen, we find that clear distinctions are drawn between their several parts, which neither clash with one another nor overlap. Events are followed by their consequences in a natural succession. The action develops itself regularly and proceeds smoothly, so that we might have concluded from this internal evidence that their author has a practical knowledge of stagecraft, even if we had not known that many years of Ibsen's life were spent in directing a theatre.

Another feature of the drama which it is important not to overlook is what we may call its impersonal, or objective rather than subjective character. By this we mean that the dramatist must never allow his own individuality to appear; for he cannot come before his hearers in his own person, but has to make use of actors as a medium of communication between himself and them. He must therefore be careful so to distribute his words among these that they may be suited to the rôles they assume, and may be felt to be really their own, not to proceed from someone hidden behind. Again, as he does not speak through one mouth, but through many, his characters must be sharply distinguished from each other. There should not be a general similarity among them, as if only one person were speaking all the while, though coming forward under different names:

but as people in real life differ widely in their interests, pursuits, and manner of living, so amongst the characters of a drama there should subsist a true diversity, and not in name only, in order that it may appeal to all the various classes out of which the audience is composed.

Here it is that Ibsen excels. We do not feel that it is he who is directly speaking to us, and that the characters are merely puppets; but he always keeps himself in the background, and we are never conscious of his presence. But, though not visible, his master-hand is everywhere at work, ordering the whole course of the action from behind. The general on the field of battle does not fight in person; but on his calm conduct of the operations and skilful management of his troops the whole issue depends; and Ibsen, in like manner, amid all the complications of his plots, never loses his grasp of the one root idea. His dramas contain the most opposite characters, taken from all classes; so that every person, even in the most heterogeneous audience, may find among them someone at least akin to himself; yet he never allows his subject to get the better of him, but throughout keeps all these turbulent elements under complete control. This he does, not by the exercise of open force, but in an easy and natural manner; accomplishing his end, without any

apparent effort on his own part, through the agency of others. He veils his own individuality behind the masks of the actors. These alone are felt to be present, and develop in action before the eyes of the audience whatever result the master desires to produce. Moreover, his characters are distinguished from one another by touches, slight indeed and unobtrusive, but none the less effective; some of the more prominent, in particular, being so powerfully drawn and leaving so distinct an impression, that anyone who has once become acquainted with them will be able, when he reflects, to recall a vivid picture of them to his mind. But they all possess a strong individuality, which they preserve throughout. Ibsen does not allow his words to lose their effect by putting them in the mouth of a person to whose *rôle* they are not adapted, neither does he shock the ears of the listeners by making the actors contradict themselves, or by endowing them at the end with a totally different disposition from that which they possessed at the beginning. His characters do not become transformed by sudden reformations in the course of the play. Their actions never belie their words, and they may each of them be made the subject of a separate study. Considered also in their relation to one another, they are matched and arranged in such a way that, when they come in

contact, their words strike the audience with the full force of their meaning. Individually opposed and contrasted, they collectively combine to form an harmonious whole, thus illustrating the truth of that saying,—“Out of things that differ arises the best harmony.”

Having now brought this brief examination to a close, we are led to conclude, after all the tests which we have applied to these works, that their genuine dramatic character has been fully established. But there is one proof, more cogent than all others, which we have reserved to the last as being in itself sufficient to establish the claims put forward on their behalf, and this is the undeniable fact that they hold the stage. This is the greatest, the most convincing, and indeed the only real and final proof of dramatic merit. For inasmuch as to attract an audience should be the object of every true drama, its power of doing this affords the best criterion of its success or failure. Experience has only too often shown that a drama may comply with all the requisites of literary form, and yet be useless for public representation. For, however faultless it may be in other respects, there still remains one thing more to be added, as the leaven to the whole lump, the want of which no observance of rules can supply. This nameless quality is the one essential, and to it all rules are but

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therefore idle to dwell upon it any further, as it defies analysis. For all are free to use the same subject-matter, and have opportunities afforded to them for contemplating human actions, and observing the course of passing events. But as the same external objects appear differently to different people, so the possession of this material will only avail one who can bring the true dramatic power to bear upon it. This power is a gift of nature, and is not the result of individual exertion. It may be cultivated and improved, but it cannot be acquired.

We may thus understand how it comes about that dramas which are devoid of this magnetic attraction always fail, though they exhibit no outward defect, while those which possess it often succeed, though they violate many of the accepted canons. For so essential is this element of human interest to the success of a drama, that no amount of acquired learning can supply its place, and so efficacious is it in its operation, that even a little of it, though confronted with massive obstacles and handicapped by many disadvantages, is able to make a way for itself with ease. The dramatist who relies upon it can outstrip and leave far behind all those competitors who were placed ahead of him at the start, and completely furnished with every artificial aid; for because they think

that these equipments are of themselves sufficient to carry the action forward without their bringing any motive power to bear upon their work, they strive in vain to overtake their less fortunate rival.

The presence of a human interest in a drama amply atones for all its faults, or rather it so engrosses the whole attention that we pass them by without ever noticing them as we are borne along in the rapid course of the action, having our interest absorbed from the beginning until we reach the end for which we set out. Even when its author only takes us a little way, he is at least to be depended upon as a reliable guide as far as he goes; whereas the learned ignorance of those who have acquired a smattering of everything, but know nothing well, though it makes great pretensions, brings the traveller no further on his road, but only burdens him with a weight of useless baggage. For though this may contain many articles in themselves serviceable enough, yet since he does not require them for the journey he has on hand, they are nothing but an encumbrance to him.

To have taken a little and to have assimilated it is better than to be filled with a mass of indigested knowledge, or, as the homely proverb expresses it—an ounce of mother wit is worth a

pound of learning: and, to go back to antiquity and bring it into contrast with the present, we find the same idea, though very differently expressed, contained in the Odes of Pindar where he says,—“Many swift shafts have I beneath my elbow within my quiver, such as have a voice for men of understanding, but for the mass of mankind they need interpreters. He is a wise man who has knowledge of many things by nature, but they whose knowledge is acquired, blustering with multitude of words, are like crows that make a vain chattering against the divine bird of Zeus.”

Dramas which have had this “one touch of nature” given to them, though too slightly to bring about a full compliance with the rules, must always be preferable to those correct but cold compositions which are absolutely devoid of any power to warm the feelings and move the heart. The true dramatist may sometimes violate the rules which long experience has approved, but he does so only in so far as his gift falls short of its full development. His work may indeed be deficient in many respects, and may carry us but a little way, but its tendency is in the right direction, and it is to be commended for its small advance, rather than condemned for its great shortcomings. But those others, whom we may not

inaptly term pseudo-dramatists, commence at the final stage, which is only reached when perfection has been attained. For the highest dramatic gift, when thoroughly trained and disciplined, at last arrives naturally at a perfect compliance with the rules as its ultimate goal. But they reverse this process and begin at the wrong end. Their work has never passed through the initiatory stages, and, being cast into a stereotyped form at the outset, it affords no ground of hope for improvement in the future. It has reached perfection all at once, but not by legitimate means, and can advance no further.

We arrive, then, at this curious position, that though these rules are undoubtedly good in themselves, it is often a more hopeful and encouraging sign that a drama should violate them, than that it should be constructed strictly on their model. Whoever has not bound himself down to a rigid adherence to fixed methods may go on making progress. That which is pliable may yet be moulded into the right shape, but that which has become hardened into a spurious imitation of the true is no longer receptive of impressions. All that has been done must be undone, and a fresh start made. There is, therefore, no reason for haste in these matters, and the dramatist who strains after a conformity to the rules will make

a bad drama, in the same way that a person who jumps at his conclusions makes wrong statements, because he does not allow himself sufficient time to enquire into the information on which they are based.

There are many who, seeing the harmonious proportions of those masterpieces which have been handed down to us, have eyes for their exterior only, and imitate this blindly without taking the trouble to discover the principles upon which they were built up. They are struck with admiration for the outward appearance of such perfect structures, but do not enter within to explore the precious things that lie hidden in their secret chambers. What they produce, therefore, is but a servile imitation, which, owing to its resemblance to some great original, makes promises that it does not fulfil, and raises hopes that can never be realised. Their works are not worthy of the name of dramas, but are to be classed as pseudo-dramas. Even those very rules on which they rely so much, and which they seem to obey so implicitly, are not properly observed by them; for they can only be truly obeyed by those who perceive the meaning that underlies them.

This perfect compliance with the rules can be reached in no other way than by a long apprentice-

ship, and the subservience which these pseudo-dramatists pay to them, thinking thereby to screen their own latent defects, is a greater outrage upon them than their open violation. Rules have no separate existence in themselves, but they presuppose that there should be something to adopt them. Given the true material, it will naturally take the right form, and it must not be thought that there is any antagonism between these two, but rather a correlation; for it is only by abstraction that it is possible to regard them separately, and they are really one and the same thing possessed of a dual aspect. They act and re-act on one another, and upon this mutual interaction the existence of each depends. By being reduced into submission to rules, therefore, the dramatic gift is tempered and modified, but not destroyed.

How is it, then, that we hear it said that literary excellence in a drama cannot subsist in conjunction with fitness for the stage? The two things do not exclude each other, but in the perfect drama they go together. They may indeed appear to be mutually repugnant for reasons above indicated, but this incompatibility does not exist in the nature of drama. And there is no reason for any despair, or to complain that, though these two things should be combined in theory, they are not actually found to be so; for Ibsen's

dramas afford a distinct proof to the contrary. Here we have a signal example of the two things co-existing. For we have already found that they possess the true literary form, and that they hold the stage does not admit of dispute, but is a plain fact, which, being evident to everyone, needs no proof. It can, therefore, be demonstrated that the social dramas of Ibsen fulfil both the required conditions. They bear examination when studied in private, and please when acted in public.

CHAPTER III

SHAKSPERE VINDICATED.

IN spite of all the irrefragable arguments that show conclusively how important is the position which Ibsen occupies in relation to the modern drama, he is not in favour with critics of the higher order. They shut their eyes to these indisputable facts, and will have nothing to do with him, though upon the people at large he has already acquired a hold which is daily becoming stronger, as there is abundant evidence to show. "Compare him," they would say, "with those who are recognised as the great dramatists of the world, and he sinks into insignificance. We need only to apply the name of Shakspeare as a touchstone to his reputation, and it will instantly fall to pieces."

This method of putting the case involves a begging of the whole question. Moreover, to compare one author with another is only so far useful as it tends to throw a new light upon their works by placing them in juxtaposition. For things are set off by contrast; and by looking at them

in relation to each other, we are enabled to take a more comprehensive view. But the habit of carrying this to an extreme is to be deprecated, for there are many people whose sole desire seems to be to see the names of different authors set down, as it were, in order of merit on a tabulated list, and who care nothing about making themselves acquainted with their works. Although it may happen so, yet it need not necessarily be that one author should stand out pre-eminent from among all the rest; but all may be alike distinguished and yet their workmanship be different. However, supposing it to be true that in English literature there is an author who, owing to the conspicuous merit of his works, deserves a place above all others, it is by no means certain, if we had some way of ascertaining to whom this honour should be assigned, that it would be found to belong to Shakspere, for there is at least one name which is entitled to take precedence to his.

This common practice of crushing a new author beneath an established reputation makes us echo the wish that there were some "Amphictyonic Court" to which these much disputed questions might be referred, and which, by pronouncing its final and definitive decision upon them, would set them forever at rest; or that there could be a

true Oracle whose priestess would rightly declare, to those who came to ask, the position which each author deserved to hold in the world of letters. It is to be feared that if Shakspeare's place were asked the reply given would be like that proverbial answer returned to the Megarians when they sent to Delphi to enquire their position in Hellas, thinking they would be declared to be the first. But the Oracle, having reserved the first places to others, replied "that they were neither third nor fourth, nor indeed had any place at all, but were out of the reckoning."

It would not be Shakspeare alone, in such an event, whose title to so great a fame as he now enjoys would be found to be defective. There are many authors who, if they could be called upon to show cause why they should not be dethroned from their present positions, would not be able to make good their right to them. Their fame remains standing, not because it is securely based upon its pedestal, but only because no attempt has been made to overthrow it.

But the case of Shakspeare is peculiar on account of the extraordinary deference which is shown towards him. The question at issue here is not whether his works deserve to be held in esteem. That is not at all the point which we mean to raise. It is whether the merit they contain is

such as to justify this extraordinary praise which has been showered upon them from every side that we are now enquiring. For it must be manifest to everyone that those are no ordinary honours which have been conferred upon Shakspeare. It is not too much to say that the position he occupies at the present day is unexampled in the history of literature. However diverse are the opinions they hold on other matters, the critics of every school are agreed here, and unite in paying their tribute to him. By common consent he is regarded as unassailable; unquestionably secure in the height of his fame.

But nevertheless we venture to ask whether there has not been exaggeration at work here. Does our admiration for Shakspeare proceed from an honest conviction of the superlative merit of his works, or is it only a kind of vain idol-worship, and the empty adulation of a name?

We are aware that even to put such a question will hardly be tolerated by many. For people are disposed at once to resent any imputation of a fault to Shakspeare without at all considering whether it be justified. Indeed, it is for his faults that he is often praised the most. His blemishes and defects have been exalted into graces and beauties. The admirers of Shakspeare are like

lovers who, says Molière, "are not governed by rules, but are always extolling their choice. Their passion never sees anything to be blamed, and everything becomes lovable in the person beloved. They reckon blemishes as perfections, and know how to give them pleasing names." Thus a glaring violation of the dramatic proprieties is extolled by them as showing his freedom from artificial restraints. Speeches that are vulgar and declamatory are treated as possessing the true manner; while to such as are turgid and obscure, strange and marvellous meanings are ascribed, which would doubtless have afforded as great a puzzle to Shakspeare himself as they do to the much-enduring public, to whose wondering contemplation they have in these latter days been revealed. Flagrant anachronisms and perversions of history, and those grotesque passages where the heroes and great men of antiquity deliver themselves of sentiments which only a modern could have expressed, and which were common among the people of Shakspeare's own time: these and many other defects of a like nature his apologists allow to pass unchallenged, or where they are so manifest as to demand some notice, their charity towards him is so great that they readily find out an excuse for them. But let thus far suffice to have drawn this parallel, for we are not

unmindful of the warning,—“On ne badine pas avec amour.”

Every author has his limitations, but the case of Shakspeare would seem to present the one exception to this rule. At least it has not yet been defined what his are; for though it is well known that obvious faults occur and abound in his works, yet they are never admitted to be such, and for anyone to so refer to them would be looked upon as a kind of literary heresy, which would bring upon the recalcitrant a speedy excommunication. Indeed, apart altogether from the question of the merit of his works, it is considered the duty of every loyal Englishman, if only for the sake of the honour of his country, to uphold Shakspeare's fame against all detractors, in the same way as he would take up arms in its defence against a foreign invasion.

But let any sober-minded person, who is actuated by no other motives than a desire to discover the truth of this matter, quietly reflect upon his works, and ask himself whether their merit is such as to warrant that extraordinary praise which they commonly receive. A good test to apply is to imagine one of them to have been put into our hands without our knowing who was its author, or at what estimate it was generally held; that we had only the work itself before us, and were possessed of no

external information whatever regarding it. What would then be the opinion which we ourselves would form of it independently in our own mind? It is only an opinion that is formed in this way that can have any stability, for if we regulate our opinions by those of others, we cannot properly call them our own at all, and consequently we are not entitled to maintain them; or, at best, they will only partly belong to us, and partly to others. Can we say, uninfluenced by any external considerations, that we are ourselves conscious not merely of the merit of Shakspeare's works, but of their superlative merit? For it must be remembered that it is of this only that we are speaking throughout. That they possess merit everyone must admit, but the question is whether they possess enough of it to support them in their present height of fame.

We feel sure that the judgment which would be delivered, on the case being submitted in such a way, would place Shakspeare's name at a much lower level on the ladder of fame than it at present occupies. He has been exalted into something greater than human, and has been taken out of all his proper relations to other authors. He sits aloft in a sphere by himself, and there is need of someone who, Prometheus-like, should bring him down again to earth and set him in his true place

among his contemporaries, that we may be able to judge him from the standpoint of the age in which he lived.

The pile of his fame has been built up to such a height that it can no longer support its own bulk. It towers so much above all surrounding objects that it has come into danger of exciting the anger of that Nemesis, which is wont to strike at everything that exalts itself beyond its proper measure.

Now we make no doubt that many will exclaim that this is an attempt to run Shakspeare down, and that we have gone out of our way to make an attack upon him. But this we resolutely deny. Not only does this question naturally arise here, but the nature of our subject demands that we should consider it. For the attention devoted to his works by students of the drama, and the amount of interest which they absorb are so overwhelming, that some reference to them in a discussion of this kind is unavoidable. A consideration of the drama containing no mention of Shakspeare must, at the present time, be incomplete. If, then, we are to consider our subject in all its bearings, and give it a full and exhaustive treatment, so that people may have the whole case set before them, this question also, as being intimately involved in it, must come before our notice. As

for the imputation of our making an attack upon him, we disclaim any intention of so doing. Of Shakspeare himself, we have been careful throughout not to speak even one word slightly. For it is an invidious thing to decry the well-earned fame of great men who have long ago passed away, and it would be better in such matters, as in the feasts of the mysteries, if we cannot speak words of good omen, to be silent altogether. If any attack has been made upon Shakspeare, it does not proceed from us; on the contrary, so far from our attacking him, it is rather we who are defending him from the insidious attacks of his real enemies, who are the more dangerous because they avow themselves to be his friends. But from such friends, who, by their misrepresentations, have given rise to all kinds of false notions concerning him, he sorely needs to be saved; for, in their mistaken zeal, these fervid admirers have so distorted his works that it is now hardly possible to view them in their true light. This idol-Shakspeare of theirs does not exist in sober fact but is the vain creature of their own imagination. They have made to themselves a kind of fetish, and now fall down and worship the thing that has no existence outside themselves, but is merely an image evolved from their inner consciousness, which they have shaped according to their own

fancy, and endowed with whatever qualities they have thought fit.

The true Shakspeare is a very different person from this idolised favourite, pampered with a foolish indulgence, and spoilt by their injudicious praises, whose works, with a singular unanimity, they seem to have specially singled out as the unfortunate subjects of their critical ingenuity. Their highly-trained intellects are far too subtle to accept an obvious meaning, but for everything that is plain and simple they discover a deeper and secondary interpretation. Their method is similar to that adopted by German professors, who, in their treatment of an author's works, can never rest satisfied until they have succeeded in raising some new and unlooked-for question regarding them; for in providing an answer to this they have an opportunity to show what it is within the power of their critical ingenuity to accomplish, and all kinds of fanciful theories spring from their fertile brains, which are quite irreconcilable with the plain meaning of the text; the result being that the works themselves, in the process of being forced to accord with these, become tortured and mutilated almost beyond recognition.

It might, indeed, have been supposed that the difficulties already existing in connection with Shakspeare were amply sufficient for the most

brilliant commentators to display their abilities upon, but it would seem that more still are required in order to call forth their powers to their full extent; so that the present amount of uncertainty attaching to his name is likely to be indefinitely increased in the future, and it is hard to predict at this moment what will be the general opinion regarding his works when they have been finally elucidated.

In almost every instance these imaginary doubts and difficulties, which are continually being suggested, may be traced to arise out of a desire on the part of their inventors to have some foundation upon which to build up a startling theory of their own to explain them, in order that they may prove themselves to be original. For this is the great object of their vanity. They deliberately determine beforehand, in their own minds, to set aside any old traditional views, without first considering whether they are true or not, and forgetting that it is necessary to appreciate before it is possible to reject. Their brilliant genius is too exalted to descend to sordid details, but would substitute for patient research some miraculous power of intuition. Their eagle spirits will commune only with nature, and they are possessed with a horrible dread lest, by an austere course of hard study, they should quench the flame of their originality,

which is the euphemistic term they are pleased to apply to an undisciplined eccentricity. Having discarded all that has been achieved by the labours of those who have gone before them, and having in this way cleared the ground for themselves, they are then enabled to accomplish their darling object and bring to light an entirely new theory of their own, the cherished offspring of a lively imagination, which is to supersede all others, and which they foster and endeavour to rear to maturity by every means that wit can devise. To this end they laboriously compile lengthy tomes, embellished with all the tricks of style, in which the sterility of the subject-matter is compensated for by a studied correctness, and the frigid thought so skilfully concealed in the multitude of words as to baffle all the efforts of those who would discover it. They do not aim to convince by a lucid and perspicuous line of argument so much as to impress by the leaden weight of their dulness; employing a process of dialectic which is willing to sacrifice the truth, provided the view proposed can be established, because they are all the time seeking to win praise for themselves rather than for the author upon whose works they are occupied. They bring all the force of their critical acumen to bear in gravely discussing matters utterly frivolous and puerile, and draw subtle contrasts, for the purpose

of showing its supposed advantages, between their own and similar theories advanced by others, all of which are framed, not with the object of eliciting the right meaning, but in order that they may produce a startling effect upon the mind. For the more unlikely they appear the more they are commended, as evincing a superior talent in their originator. Thus, at last, becoming entangled in their own nets, they take credit to themselves for explaining the imaginary difficulties of their own making, and are even persuaded that their grotesque interpretations are helping to expound the supposed hidden meaning of those passages which they only serve to wrap in a darker shroud of mystery.

Such professed admirers of Shakspeare do not devote their attention to his works with the object of acquiring a just appreciation of them, neither do they value them for their own sake. They are not satisfied to have their reward in themselves, but are possessed with a burning desire to talk about them to others and to leave their own impressions of them on record, thus making it abundantly manifest that they have never entered into the spirit of their author. They cannot resign themselves to the inward enjoyment of the fruits of their study, but hasten to proclaim to the world how small is the sum total which they have been

able to glean from another man's work, or, as it has been well put, "they vend their misunderstandings to the public as explanations." All these Shakspeare-problems, which they are so ready to put forward, they take no pains to work out to any final result—nor, indeed, from their very nature do they admit of being finally settled—but they bequeath them unsolved to their successors, who are obliged to spend upon them a long and wearisome study; not that any benefit is to be derived from them, but solely because, in the course of time, they have become recognised as questions necessary to be discussed in connection with Shakspeare, and some acquaintance with them is expected in all who claim to have a thorough knowledge of his works.

But surely people have submitted long enough to quietly endure the burdens imposed upon them by these so-called Shakspeare-scholars, which they themselves never help in the least to bear! They create difficulties, but do not show how they are to be surmounted, and put stumbling-blocks in the way, but do nothing to remove them; thus making the road to knowledge well-nigh impassable to those that come after. These are the bane of literature, and cause it to be in bad repute with many who might have come to hold it in honour, but because the limited time at their disposal was

all spent in lingering on the threshold, they were obliged to turn away before they could gain admittance into the temple, and they have in consequence become imbued with such an aversion to such studies that they have given them up altogether in disgust; nor is it a matter for wonder, since all their knowledge of literature is drawn from its polluted streams, if they never afterwards feel an inclination to go on to taste the waters that spring from its true fountains.

But how is it, let us ask, that the works of Shakspeare have been encumbered with such a heavy yoke of useless learning? Is it not because the people who, if they could only be brought to understand it, are the real masters of the situation, have renounced their freedom of thought and been content to follow blindly the leadership of others? Dissatisfied with their natural state of liberty, and being determined to set up a king over themselves, they now complain at having to undergo the burdens which he puts upon them. If it were not for this slothful habit of mind, they would never have become subject to oppression at the hands of their own dependents. For these task-masters whom they have appointed over themselves only flourish in the sunshine of their favour, and cannot, therefore, afford to run counter to their expressed opinion. This state of

affairs could not continue to exist except for their allowing it. Why, then, do they not rise in revolt against all this scholastic tyranny, and shake themselves free from these fetters of their own forging? It is full time that something should be done to expose the secret practices resorted to by the priests of this fetish worship, who have so long held the minds of the people enchained under its spell, that they are no longer able to see Shakspeare's works as they really are. For, by assuming an imposing manner and an impressive dignity of demeanour, they try to overawe them into the acceptance of their hollow sophisms, well knowing some outward deception to be necessary in order to get them to swallow their nauseous panaceas, and that no one in his sober senses would tolerate such absurd follies. The name of Shakspeare is with them a thing to conjure with. They use it as a kind of talisman, whose charm is irresistible, and with which they work all manner of wonders. Occult meanings are announced by them with a weighty solemnity which becomes unconsciously ridiculous, and when they have to choose one out of several interpretations given to a passage, they pass over those that are plain and simple, and select that which is the most strained and far fetched, which it would be safe to say that Shakspeare himself never intended his words to bear. But

they represent him as so august a personage, and his works as being altogether so infallible, that whoever perceives a manifest fault in them, which he would not hesitate to condemn in another, is constrained to justify Shakspeare rather than his own senses; as if anyone should be so convinced of the exact verisimilitude of a photograph as to hold by it rather than the original from which it was taken, and, when confronted with a plain discrepancy between the two, should console himself with the reflection that the apparatus cannot lie. For it is argued that since Shakspeare's mind received all its impressions direct from nature and reproduced these with life-like fidelity, everything he says must therefore be incontrovertible.

In this way the encomiasts of Shakspeare have so wrought upon the public imagination that his works have come to be generally regarded as the repository of things deep and mysterious, and they consequently find them a grand and unfailing resource when they wish to perform their miracles of criticism. In them they claim to possess a mine of literary wealth whose unfathomable depths abound with untold treasures, which can never be exhausted. So wide, we are told, is the range of Shakspeare's intellect as to be almost co-extensive with human thought itself. They would have us regard him as an authority on every subject.

Whatever matter is under discussion, they will unearth something out of his works which is appropriate to it. They are unwilling, however, to admit the people to a share in all this wealth, but jealously conceal the choicest things, that they may keep the undisturbed enjoyment of them exclusively to themselves. They desire to have Shakspeare as their own peculiar possession, and, by feigning the existence of an underlying purpose in his plays, withhold the right of free access to them from all except their own confederates. When they have said all they can think of in their praise, they then pretend that the most precious things they contain are those which they still hold in reserve and will not reveal to the common gaze; thus awakening a curiosity which they know they cannot gratify, in order to add to their own importance. For it is in every way to their advantage to foster that opinion which regards Shakspeare as having been endowed with a mystical lore, transcending the limits of ordinary knowledge, and which would take him out from among human beings and give him a seat among the immortals. They have, therefore, hedged his works round with a sacred enclosure, and themselves pose as the guardians of the unspeakable things within. Like prudent men, they have laid out the slender means at their

disposal with such forethought, that they have caused the popular mind to form an exaggerated notion of the riches of their knowledge, and have gained to themselves more credit from what they have withheld than from what they have disclosed.

Such are the tactics they employ in order to work upon the credulity of those whose imagination pictures to itself as mysterious everything that is unknown. Being in continual fear lest their artful schemes should be detected, they try to invest the name of Shakspeare with a sanctity not to be violated by the profane; but it is a false sanctity, which has been instituted only for the purpose of baulking enquiry. They will not shield their idol from exposure by dressing it up in gaudy coverings and vain tinsel, neither will a pompous exterior deter the already advancing footsteps from approaching. Let us not hesitate to lay rude hands upon this idol, and tear down the splendid drapery with which it is enveloped. Draw aside the veil and behold the hideous countenance of the false image, in order that, having once seen it with our own eyes, we may ever afterwards know how to discern between the true Shakspeare and the base counterfeit which his frenzied votaries would palm off upon us; and may thus finally disabuse our minds of all that is unreal and unwarranted in the respect we show to him: for this is the

result we wish to bring about in drawing this distinction.

Instead, therefore, of censuring these remarks as tending to detract from Shakspeare's fame, all his true friends and well-wishers will rather hail them as a vindication. For if they are really well disposed towards him, they must welcome an attempt which has for its express object the protection of his name from receiving injury, on the one hand, from fulsome flatterers, and on the other, from those whose praise of him is not regulated by their understanding. These latter constitute by far the more numerous class; they simply join in the general chorus in which the voices of those who know the least of Shakspeare will often be heard shouting the loudest. There are many who have no acquaintance at all with his works, but know him by name only, who will nevertheless rush in blindly to his defence, at every opportunity, no matter what be the point on which he is assailed. For when they see that Shakspeare's name is involved in the debate, they never stop a moment to consider which side to take; but, thinking the result a foregone conclusion, hasten to his assistance, as if afraid of being too late to share in the spoils of an easy victory. But since they do not take the trouble to first provide themselves with the armour of well-ordered speech, they betray

their ignorance as often as they break silence ; and, at the same time, bring into discredit and weaken by their too eager support the cause which they are so clamorous to maintain. Had they been less ready to talk about their high opinion of Shakspeare, it might have been supposed to have had some reasonable foundation ; but now that they have seen fit to declare the grounds on which it is based, it is at once made apparent that they are not such as to justify the unprecedented honours with which they have loaded him.

The existence of this evil having been disclosed, the best remedy for it is that, having laid aside our former opinion of these works, we should take them up afresh, and, approaching them with a mind open to receive impressions, try to arrive at their true estimate. If, in thus passing them under review, the search-light of our inspection should disclose any blemishes, let us not hunt about to find excuses for these, but let us be bold enough to fully recognise them for what they are. For to slur them over would only make it appear that we are afraid Shakspeare's works would not survive the test of a thorough examination. But we need not be over-anxious to explain them away on this account, for we are not likely to find them so serious as to destroy the good feeling towards him, which the breadth of his humanity inspires in

us. But though it be true that his defects are outbalanced by his merits, we are not therefore to think of them as though they did not exist.

However, it is not our desire to dwell on Shakspeare's imperfections, or to emphasise his faults in any way, and we are quite willing to comply with the request which he himself makes to his audience—"Gently to hear, kindly to judge our play." Our purpose is simply to make the real facts of the case clearly understood, preferring to face a disagreeable truth than to obstinately cherish a pleasing illusion. This is a service for which we maintain that Shakspeare himself would be the first to thank us. For that fame gives no satisfaction which is felt to be undeserved; and the voice of praise, unless the heart consents to it, is but a hollow mockery. All this adulation, which is so lavishly and thoughtlessly poured upon him, must in the end do him harm. It is always to a man's advantage to be taken at his true estimate, and to be known for what he is rather than for what he is not. To set up the "live-long monument" which Shakspeare has built for himself on a higher niche in the temple of fame than it is entitled to occupy, does him no less an injury than to withhold from it the place which belongs to it by right. We take the middle and sober course, and endeavour to bring it down to a proper and reasonable level.

For indeed reason calls out to prune this overgrown tree of his fame. "It does not follow," says Sir Philip Sidney, "that good is not good because better is better," and, after cutting away all this overgrowth, a great name still remains. But if he be overrated in one age, the natural effect of this will be to provoke a re-action, which may cause him to be underrated in the next. "For opposite errors," says Bacon, "proceed from common causes."

CHAPTER IV.

CRITICAL HOSTILITY TO IBSEN.

HAVING now carefully looked into the various objections advanced against Ibsen's claim to rank as a dramatist, we cannot find, for all our search, that they disclose any satisfactory reason why it should have been so contemptuously dismissed. The conclusion is forced upon us, after a consideration of the whole matter, that they all have their root in nothing more than a vague suspicion of these social dramas and an ill-defined dislike of their author. The mass of argument that confronts us seems formidable at first sight, but, when subjected to analysis, it vanishes away in a cloud of vapour, leaving no solid residuum of truth behind. For instead of the question being directly met, we find attempts to evade it by diverting the attention to side issues, and instead of a suspension of the judgment until the case should be fully heard, we find a fixed determination, should the evidence prove to be too strong, in any event to

ignore a claim which, if fairly entertained, would have to be admitted.

But although those who pass for being judges in these matters altogether refuse to recognise Ibsen, they will not be able to erect any effectual barriers between him and the public which he will not ultimately surmount. They may deny him a fauteuil in their academy, but they cannot preclude him from taking a high place in the distinguished company of dramatists, for this is an honour which it rests with the people to confer. So long as its waters are not cut off from above, every effort to stem the advancing tide of Ibsen's fame cannot but be futile. Notwithstanding the obstructions that beset its lower course, it must eventually find an outlet. The stream which has its source in an unfailing spring must at last overtop the highest embankment. We can therefore afford to wait patiently in the certain knowledge that no permanent obstacles can be raised to bar its progress, but that, as it has broken through many already, so it will also those that still remain. The longer the pent-up waters are held back, the more they gain in strength. So far from dissipating the force of the torrent, these temporary checks enable it to concentrate its power, and when it does burst forth, it flows along in a mightier volume than before. It is only a matter of time, and the

strongest barriers must all be swept away, and then, free and clear from every interruption, the swollen tide rolls onward with augmented stream on its irresistible course, until it finally empties itself out into the ocean of the great world. In all such cases the same process has to be gone through, though it takes place in different forms according to the varying external conditions. It is a warfare that is being waged through all time, though carried on with different weapons in different ages. These critical obstructions must first be broken down before a free access to the people can be attained ; as it has been enigmatically expressed,—
“ We see the small world, then the great.”

Strange though it may at first appear that this opposition should proceed from those who are looked upon as leaders of thought, a quarter which is the last from which we should have been disposed to expect it, a closer examination of the recorded cases shows it to be nevertheless true that those literary dictators, who affect to guide the public taste and have made it their province to decree to the people what they are to admire and what they are to shun, are scarcely ever found assisting them to form a right judgment or even placing the means of so doing within their power by turning their enquiries into the true channels. Instead of smoothing the path and helping to bring

the author into closer contact with his public, they busy themselves with industriously erecting barriers between them.

And yet there has perhaps never been a time when a sound expression of opinion from those who are qualified to speak of these matters would have been more welcome and helpful than at the present. For in former days, when literature was scarce, there was not the same need for the exercise of care in making a selection, for the obvious reason that the power of choice was far less extensive. Works of all kinds were so rare, and the opportunities of making them known so restricted, that only a few could be brought within the general reach, and these were therefore prized accordingly. When there was only room for the admission of a limited number, the gates of entrance were more jealously guarded, and corruptions did not escape detection by creeping in unnoticed. The claims of those only could be recognised who could plead special merit. Hardly could mediocrity obtain a hearing, much less any inferior productions.

This scarcity of literature had also the effect of making the nature of such as was to be obtained more clearly understood, owing to the energies of those who applied themselves to it being confined within a smaller compass ; in the same way as it

happens in the case of the individual, who in a little community becomes known almost immediately to all its inhabitants, while in a crowded city he may go about for years without his real character ever being discovered. If it was then a hard matter to gain access to any literature at all, such works as were obtainable generally well repaid the extra attention devoted to them. Their titles were more trustworthy in that they were more to be depended upon for a reliable account of whatever subject they professed to treat, and the fact of their number being limited afforded a guarantee of their being genuine, and was a bar to servile imitations.

But the case with us is widely different from what it was with the people of those times. Their difficulty ceased where ours begins. For now the precious things have all been unearthed, and placed within such easy reach as to be accessible to everyone. But though we have them present with us, yet if we do not possess the power in ourselves to recognise them we will never be able to enjoy them, but, like Tantalus in the fable, we shall remain hungry in the midst of plenty; for they do not come before us alone, but side by side with the common and the vile, and all alike present the same outward appearance.

Our difficulty, then, is not to obtain but to dis-

tinguish. Where once there was a dearth there is now a plethora. The market is glutted to an extent which becomes greater every year, with an immense quantity of what goes by the name of literature; and as such indeed it is only fair that a large portion of it should be provisionally considered, until it be proved on acquaintance whether it is rightly called so or not. Yet, notwithstanding this enormous increase in quantity, if the exact number of good authors could be ascertained, it would probably be found to be much the same now as formerly. For if we take this term to apply to all whose work is original and independent, and tends to advance in some way upon what has already been effected in any department of knowledge, it must be admitted that there are but few out of those who have contributed to swell the bulk of literature who can properly be included under it. *A priori*, there is no reason to suppose that more works of sterling merit and lasting value should be produced in this present age than in any preceding it. Each generation adds its quota towards the completion of the temple of literature; building upon what has been already erected by its predecessors, and producing work of a different character according to the stage in which the building happens to be at the particular time. The simple and massive workmanship of the lower

structure becomes more complex and highly-finished as the summit is reached ; yet each several part harmonises with every other, that there may be nothing disproportionate in the completed whole. But it is not every stone that can be used in this work, but only those of the highest quality. It does not therefore follow, because the output has been greater, that the building will progress more rapidly on this account. A huge quantity of material has been brought upon the field, but the bulk of this will have to be rejected ; some of it as unfit for use at all, some as not being of a quality suited to raise the pile above the height to which it has already attained.

Accordingly, the danger of making a wrong, and the difficulty of making a right choice, increase in proportion as the range of selection becomes wider. It is true that after a while everyone usually marks out a department of literature for himself, and by following out one line of thought, obtains a grasp of certain starting-points which give him a surer standing in the midst of a perplexing variety, so that he is often able intuitively to judge whether any particular work has a bearing or not upon that subject to which he has devoted special attention. But to the inexperienced beginner all this unclassified array of literature is nothing less than bewildering. How is he to choose correctly among so many

works without some direction, when all have equal pretensions? And yet it is just at this time, before a decided preference for any special branch of literature has been formed, that it is most important that a right selection should be made; for whoever starts on the wrong path may continue to travel by it for the rest of the journey. When its higher faculties have been allowed to degenerate for want of use, the mind feels no inclination towards those things which it might otherwise have learned to appreciate; and, by being continually brought into contact with inferior productions, at last contracts a vitiated taste. But no one who has once felt the charm that resides in the company of good authors will afterwards care to associate with those of inferior merit.

But the difficulty is to find out who these are, and to know whom to believe when everyone gives a different answer. Admitting that these are questions which each person must solve for himself, yet before it is possible to set about doing this, a definite perception of certain first principles is required as part of the necessary equipment for the work. For though it is generally supposed that in literature everything happens by chance, this is very far from being the case. As among other classes of phenomena, so among those of literature, a regular order is observed, and laws are

to be discovered, which are universal in their application, and which are invariably obeyed. In the literature not only of our own, but of all countries at all periods, the same processes can be detected, and by watching them in their working, we come to understand how the inward thought is moulded by the outward circumstances. Accordingly, the tyro who comes for the first time upon the crude mass of literature, though he cannot get these questions solved for him by anyone else, may at least have the proper way pointed out to him by which to set about solving them for himself. So much guidance at least he is entitled to as of right, until he has had opportunity to arrange his subject under heads, and to establish inter-connections; after which he will be placed in a position of independence, for the workman who has once been instructed in the rudiments of his craft, possesses within himself the means of becoming a master of it, and is able for the future to dispense with help from others.

But when the professional guides are blind, what is such a person to do? In this case the wisest plan for him to adopt is to pay no heed to them whatever, but, relying on his own unaided judgment, to make the most of disadvantageous circumstances and to learn to do without that assistance which he might reasonably have expected to receive,

but which, through no fault of his own, has been denied to him. For by a process akin to that of natural selection, the mind, when left entirely to itself, is spontaneously attracted towards those studies for which it has an affinity, and which it is therefore best adapted to pursue. In this way there is at least some chance of making a right choice, but in the other none at all. When the finger-posts point in wrong directions, they are worse than useless, and it is best to disregard them altogether. Some few there are to whom it is a pleasure to wander in the crooked paths which they indicate, such as do not apply themselves to literature for its own sake, but only that they may learn to speak the jargon of the barbarous horde of pretenders with which its environs are infested. But the majority of those who have allowed themselves to be guided by these mentors, soon find that they lead them to no desirable goal; and, when they see how they have been duped, they not only refuse to follow them any further, but become imbued with such a feeling of revulsion towards the things by which they were once attracted, that they never care to retrace their steps and make a fresh start in order to attain them. In this way an incalculable amount of harm is done to literature, for they who have once been victimised become for ever afterwards suspicious and appre-

hensive, and are mistrustful of all advice, from whatever quarter it is given. Their example may serve as a warning to all others, who are journeying by this route, to be on their guard against the impostors who offer their services as guides with such alacrity, and to beware of yielding to their overtures when they artfully endeavour to insinuate themselves into their good opinion. For, having enticed people from the right direction in which they were going, they do not point out any alternative path by which they may reach the end which they have in view, but they lead them on and on, all the time inwardly despising them for the confidence they repose in them, until at last, when they have become wearied and perplexed with threading their way through an inextricable labyrinth, they desert them entangled in the midst of it. They will not let them taste of the things for which they have a natural inclination, but, dazzling them by splendid promises, induce them to go in quest of the viands which they offer; then, having brought them out into a barren wilderness, they supply them with a kind of food indeed, but instead of its being that which they had led them to expect, it is a mental pabulum which is like bread that does not satisfy. They persuade them to give up the little they have in the hope of obtaining more, to abandon the reality to pursue a vain

chimera ; and, when they will no longer submit to their dictation, they leave them in the lurch, without a thought of providing them with any compensation for what they have taken away.

Such persons play the part of Nihilists in literature, inasmuch as their policy is wholly negative. They break down, overthrow, and demolish, but here their work ends, for they never replace what they have destroyed by any adequate substitute. Like the savage hordes of Goths and Vandals, these profane intruders have no sense of veneration for the noble monuments of literature to keep them from laying their sacrilegious hands upon them, neither are they at all afraid to desecrate the shrines of learning, but entering boldly in they despoil their invaluable archives and plunder their priceless treasures, working wreck and ruin among the things their barbarian minds cannot appreciate. Their ruthless course is marked only by desolations, and no abiding traces remain by which they will be remembered in the aftertime. No new work arises, Phoenix-like, out of the smouldering embers which their career of devastation leaves behind. For to all things that are new they are particularly averse, and accordingly it is in dealing with these that they show most clearly how captious are the methods which they are accustomed to pursue. They try to nip the opening flowers in the bud,

just as they are full of promise and before they can display their beauty. For when a new work has not yet had time to become established in the public favour, they are free to pass their strictures upon it without fear of their being combated. Their eyes are keen to discover matter for censure, but blind to everything else ; and when they cannot blame, they will not praise.

But the true method of criticism is not, as they seem to think, to take the sum of the merits and the sum of the defects, and then, subtracting the one from the other, and having, as it were, struck a balance between them, to pronounce judgment accordingly. It is possible to fully understand many of the parts, and yet never to perceive the tendency of the whole. In passing any work under review, we must first of all put ourselves in sympathy with its author, and try to form some idea of his personality, in order that we may obtain the clue which will enable us to reach the central idea from which all the parts radiate. Not until we have discovered this one pervading thought, which animates the whole and gives tone and colour to all its infinite variety, shall we be entitled to announce our opinion ; for according as this is good in its essence or otherwise, so will it be with the work itself.

This is the method indicated in that excellent canon of criticism,—“Survey the whole, nor seek

slight faults to find," which was laid down by Pope, whose too little revered name would seem to have preserved something of the terror which it had for the dunces of his own time down to their descendants of the present, judging by their silent conspiracy to depreciate his genius, and from the persistent manner in which, by blaming the master for the faults of his followers, they seek to bring into discredit his undeniably great works.

It is no use picking out a merit or a defect here and there, in order to raise admiration or draw down contempt. This discursive method will never yield any reliable results. Our judgment may be quite correct as to the particular point with which it deals, but utterly wrong as an estimate of the whole. When a person, after having enumerated certain defects in one part of a work which are justly accounted as such, passes on from this to condemn the work in its entirety, he adopts a most unwarrantable course of procedure. We must get down to the root from which the plant springs and expands into all its diversified foliage and many-hued flowers. When once we have gained an insight into the true nature of the plants in the flower-garden of literature, we will no longer follow the dictates of a capricious fancy or passing humour by wilfully cutting about and disfiguring them, lopping off the green branches and sparing

those that are decayed ; but we will know how to tend them with such skill as to foster their growth, so that, under a judicious pruning, they may flourish in prolific luxuriance.

But as roses do not bloom at every season of the year, we must not expect the same degree of excellence in all the different parts of a work. Everything is not to be kept at one dead level. Those passages which serve as foils to set off what are more striking are not less worthy of attention on that account, but rather, since they do not of themselves attract so much notice, they demand a greater care lest they should be passed over. If the transitional passages of a work be neglected, the pleasing effect of light and shade will be destroyed, and the links broken in the chain of continuity, so that the culminating point, towards which every incident converges, will be robbed of all its force.

The eclectic method adopted by those who think that the whole of criticism consists in bringing defects to light, is easy enough for any to follow, but it is nevertheless wholly to be condemned as being quite opposed to the true and much more difficult method, which aims first of all to gain a sympathy with the author before expressing an opinion upon his work one way or another. Those parasites of literature who exhaustively deal with the faults of others' works, and abundantly expose

their shortcomings, always take good care never to produce any independent work of their own, lest by so doing they should put weapons in the hands of their victims, who are thus left without means of retaliation against their attacks. Accordingly, since they contend fully armed against those who are unarmed, they have all the best of the situation, and it is only by its sheer superior power that the advancing force makes any headway against their determined opposition. But though its progress is slow, it is never at a standstill; and the utmost its opponents can do is to delay the inevitable. Notwithstanding such unequal odds, it is against the laws of nature that desert should be permanently held under. It must continue to rise until it reaches its own level.

These are the drones in the hive, unprofitable in the commonwealth of letters. Non-producers themselves, they live in luxurious ease upon the rich store industriously gathered by the patient labours of others, and try to prevent its rightful owners from even sharing in it. Conscious of their own demerit and of the weakness of their claim to the high position which they have usurped, they are far too sagacious to bring to light any material which the other side might seize upon to put in evidence against themselves, and resort to all sorts of nefarious practices to hide their failings behind

a good exterior appearance. By making a great display of their theoretical knowledge, and maintaining a mysterious reserve on all other points, they give rise to a high impression regarding their dormant capabilities, and what they could do if they were only to take the trouble to exert them. But all this wealth of theory which they have amassed they keep jealously hoarded up among themselves, and grudge to put it into practice.

Let us, however, for a moment imagine that, having been asked to produce, as a specimen of their powers, something which the uninitiated might take as a model for their future guidance, they should by some chance agree to comply with the request. What sort of a creation are we to suppose that this living embodiment of so much refined subtlety would be? Perhaps it is as well after all that they have refused to divulge these mysteries, for doubtless they would be incomprehensible to the ordinary intelligence.

And yet, if they had had some practical experience of these matters, they might have shown a more sympathetic appreciation of the difficulties that attend those who actually endeavour to frame into suitable words the half-developed thoughts that suggest themselves to the mind. Many an undertaking which seems perfectly easy in theory is found by those who attempt to carry it into

execution to be beset with countless unforeseen obstacles. But, as it is, they resemble those loiterers who stand idly looking on at what others are doing, and aggravating the difficulty of their already sufficiently arduous tasks by offering them gratuitous advice, which is the more exasperating as it bears on the face of it the stamp of insincerity. This is the destructive attitude. Those who adopt it have the advantage of making their attacks from a position of comparative safety, for they leave no loophole by which the objects of their aggression can assail them in return.

But from such a one-sided encounter, where the combatants are so ill-matched, there is less glory to be obtained than from the struggle in which those engage who make an effort to set our knowledge of any subject a degree further forward. However apparent their failures, and however small the measure of their success, it is right that they should have full credit for what little they have achieved. It is easier to pull down than to build up; and though it is sometimes necessary to remove those parts which have fallen into decay, yet this must not be done in a spirit of mere wanton destruction, but only with a view to restoring them again, for, by clearing away useless accumulations, a space is left for the erection of a new and better edifice in place of the old. The

building up is the end; the pulling down is the means to that end—the latter is subservient to the former. For, seeing that no work is absolutely perfect, it is well, when there has been a distinct advance of any kind, however slight, to take care lest it be lost sight of in laying too much stress upon the faults in company with which it is found. All who have something new to contribute in furtherance of human knowledge, and whose works, whether directly or indirectly, tend to the advancement of literature, deserve an attentive hearing. This is the constructive attitude. It renders those who adopt it more liable to censure, but nevertheless it is the better of the two.

Now it will be plain to everyone who knows anything at all of Ibsen's works, that between him and these critical cavillers there can be nothing in common. Accordingly, the dishonourable treatment he has received at their hands need excite no surprise, for a little reflection will make it clear that it would have been impossible for them to have done otherwise than reject his works, which are a standing protest against all their methods, and expose the hollowness of their whole system. So entirely free are they from every trace of over-refinement and affectation, that the critics of the higher order can find nothing at all in them to appeal to their subtle minds, and declare that they

are not literature. We may be sure that beneath all their lofty and scornful contempt there lurks a carefully-concealed anxiety regarding their own position, lest, if these social dramas should ever become established in public favour, all their frantic vituperation should recoil upon their own heads. This anxiety is by no means ill-founded, for the day is not far distant when they will have to modify the terms in which they speak of Ibsen at present. There are unmistakable signs that a general acceptance of the claims put forward on his behalf is inevitable, and, if they would be numbered with the orthodox, they will be eventually obliged to tender their homage to him, although they will no doubt withhold it until the last hour. And when this result has been accomplished, their treatment of Ibsen may well be cited as a signal example to show the utter incompetence of these official censors, the memory of which may effectually dispose of all their pretensions to authority, and cause them for ever afterwards to keep silence.

However, we must not suppose that his is an isolated case, for it is but one of many instances where the opinion naturally formed in the minds of dispassionate outsiders, untrammelled by bias and prejudice, has been at variance with that of the accredited judges. Indeed, so extremely fre-

quent are these cases of conflict, that we are led to infer, when we take them all into consideration, that between the popular and the critical opinion there subsists a natural antipathy. And almost invariably, when such contests have taken place, it has been the popular verdict, rather than the critical, which has been affirmed on the appeal to posterity. This divergence has not been confined to our own day, but is a long-standing feud which existed even in ancient times. The instances of it are not sporadic, but universal, and the numerous examples which might be cited from different countries at different epochs of their history are sufficient, when taken together, to establish it as a law, the operation of which will be inevitable whenever the same phenomena concur. Thus Martial seems to have been beset by this plague of literature, when, in one of his epigrams, he uses these words,—“From the general public, Aulus, my works meet with approval; but there is a certain superior person”—for so may “poeta” be here rendered, the word having at that period of Roman literature degenerated in its meaning, in the same way as it has in this period of our own—“who says that they are not in the true manner. But,” he goes on to say, “this does not trouble me much, for I would rather the courses served at my banquet found favour with the guests than with the cooks.”

But it certainly strikes the mind as being a strange paradox that theirs should be the worse opinion who have had the best advantages. This curious condition of affairs appears at first sight unaccountable, and calls for some explanation. For such a statement, viewed as it stands by itself, if allowed to pass without further comment, would seem to furnish an argument in support of that widely prevalent but altogether erroneous view, according to which no preliminary training is required in order to excel in literature. In all other pursuits, everyone knows that he must submit to go through a long and arduous course of preparation, before he can hope to become proficient in them; and no one ever thinks that he can obtain success in any other way, or that he would do better to dispense with this period of probation altogether. It is nothing but a commonplace that all must learn the rudiments of their craft before attempting to practise it. But to this universal rule the case of literature, it would seem, is to offer the solitary exception; for there is a widespread belief that here the aspirant attains to excellence all at once without any effort on his own part, and that he drops into the first position by virtue solely of an inborn gift, which is only deadened and dulled by being subjected to the discipline of a severe course of training.

It may be that, in the ranks of self-constituted literary judges, there are many who fit and prepare themselves to mete out their summary rewards and punishments in accordance with these notions; for it would appear, from the superficial character of some of their deliverances, that these lofty dispensers of censure do not at all consider it necessary, before venturing to pass an opinion upon a work which has taken much time and thought to produce, that they should first have some acquaintance with the subject of which it treats. So wonderful a facility of insight does the critical faculty bestow upon its fortunate possessor, that it is in itself all-sufficient, and the novice who is endowed with it requires nothing further, but is fully equipped and qualified to sit in judgment upon the most abstruse questions.

But the author who accepts this principle and attempts to act upon it, will soon find that he has made a grievous mistake. If in all other subjects some preliminary training is indispensable before anyone can be qualified to handle them skilfully, much more is this true of literature, for here the path is less clearly defined, and therefore a greater experience is required by those who would walk in it without stumbling. Elsewhere the lines of study have for the most part been plainly laid

down; but, because in the case of literature they are not so obvious, an impression has grown up that on this ground a greater latitude is permissible, and everyone may do exactly as he pleases. For, the range of literature being universal, and as it is not restricted to any special class of subjects, it affords opportunity for the exercise of every kind of talent; but, on the other hand, it is the resort of many who take advantage of this liberty to conduct themselves with a licence which would not be tolerated anywhere else. However, there is no royal road by which it is possible to enter within the precincts of literature, and those who disregard its legitimate methods will sooner or later be entrapped in one of the numerous pitfalls with which its paths are infested. For while it is true that it offers scope for the greatest variety of style, at the same time it has its inviolable canons which it is fatal to transgress.

But side by side with this fact, we are met by the preliminary objection that in the best works the presence of artificial rules and forms is hardly discernible at all, and that, speaking generally, the better a work is, the fewer will be the traces of their influence to be discovered on the face of it. Since, therefore, we find that better results are achieved where the presence of technicalities cannot be detected, it is useless to throw away

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cause they have not been content to reproduce it in the same form in which they received it, but have used it as the stepping-stone to a further advance. Though the foundations do not meet the eye, we know that they must have been well laid before the building could have been erected. Because they have cast off all the shackles of conventional forms, this does not necessarily imply that they have bidden them defiance, but rather the reverse. Those who begin by setting themselves above these, will end by being brought down into subjection to them. For that lofty scorn itself, which they profess to feel for them, may be traced to the unconscious servitude under which they are held. But those who render a complete submission to them in the first instance, make their way up, little by little, out of the darkness of the prison into the light of independence. But when they have obtained this knowledge, they do not seek to make a display of it, by seizing every opportunity to drag in technical terms, but scrupulously avoid the unnecessary use of them. Their works have no need of meretricious ornaments in order to win esteem; for their inward worth makes itself sufficiently apparent without them, and such artificial aid would obscure rather than set it off. Excessive decoration is the resource of those who have defects to hide; but those

who depend upon their own merit for success can afford to dispense with such assistance.

These considerations cast a new light upon that "great discovery" of which Ibsen speaks, and help us to realise more forcibly the truth of those words of his,—*"The strongest man upon earth is he who stands most alone."* We may take, for a fair standard by which to measure the merit of a work, the amount of artificial aid which its author has invoked; for the two will generally be found to vary inversely, the one being present according as the other is absent; but those who are able to do without such help altogether, may be said to have reached *"the highest attainable pitch of greatness."* Having gradually put away everything technical and artificial, they have at length developed a perfectly easy and natural manner.

But it is unfit that those who, but for the restraints imposed upon them, would proceed lawlessly, should have this perfect liberty. Entire freedom from all the restraints of rule is a thing eminently desirable, but then this is to be attained by obeying, and not by kicking against them. Patience is more effectual in its working than violence. Those who presume to outrage the inviolable canons of literature will not do so with impunity, but will only become the more hopelessly entangled in the meshes of those technicalities

which they think they can escape by simply ignoring them. But those who submit to be governed by them at last come to understand the essential truth which each contains, and thus become emancipated from their control. Their long service has entitled them to claim manumission at the hands of their masters, and they no longer wear any outward badge of servitude.

But the others cannot shake themselves free from the fetters of technicalities, but remain enslaved to them all their days, and never rise to be anything more than the drudges who do the servile work of literature. In all their works they make it manifest that their thoughts have been running upon the outward form, and that they have been willing to sacrifice every grace, provided this might be correct. The frequent "marks of the file," with which they are disfigured, show that their words do not proceed from them spontaneously, but that they have been haunted by an overpowering dread of the supervision of the Stagyrite. Being hampered by self-consciousness, they cannot freely speak their mind; and because they have been over anxious to appear natural, their manner is only the more constrained. With them the formalities of introduction never ripen into an intimate acquaintance, because they forget that forms in themselves are nothing more than empty moulds, which are quite useless

if there be no material to throw into them. When isolated and looked at in the abstract, they are dead; and they need to be electrified and galvanised into life by the warm inspiration of thought. But the thought which they put into them is so attenuated, and its current so weak, that it altogether fails to make itself felt, and those who, from their promising appearance, expect their works to contain something animated and satisfying, find on looking into them that they are dull and uninteresting, and turn away disappointed. Like the author of *Hudibras*, they ask for bread but they receive a stone.

Every subject has its technicalities, which must be overcome by all who would make themselves masters of it. But these are not worthy of attention for their own sake, but only in so far as they serve as an introduction to that friendly and delightful intercourse which alone is profitable. The work produced by those who have been betrayed into confounding this end with the means provided for attaining it, instead of being an harmonious whole made up of well-arranged parts, and recognisable by the stamp of individuality, is a conglomerate mass of disjointed thoughts, and repels rather than attracts. We have, as it were, not one compound, but a collection of several elements. There is no power to fuse the form with

the substance of the thought to which it is ancillary, and consequently it never loses its original unprepossessing appearance by merging it in something more inviting, but preserves it unsoftened and unmodified in all its stereotyped rigidity. Thus, by continually observing the presence of technicalities in conjunction with inferiority, we are led, by an association of ideas, to suppose that no good results can be produced by their means, whereas all the time the fault lies with those who do not know the proper way to treat them. Being wholly occupied with what is accidental to the neglect of that which is essential, they have multiplied and refined upon these technicalities to such an extent, that, though originally designed as a help, they have perverted them into being a hindrance, and have involved themselves in such a maze of intricacies, that they cannot make their way through them to obtain any desirable knowledge. So clouded has their vision become, that they cannot see clearly to discern the true significance even of the very forms to which they attach so much importance, but are snared in their own nets.

But to say that such technical knowledge is useless because some have not been able to profit by it, would be too wide an inference to draw; for there have been many who have turned it to good

account. We must lay the blame not on the tools, but on the workmen. For as it is dangerous to leave edged tools in the care of those who understand nothing about them, so to have had opportunities and fail to profit by them is worse than never to have had any at all. Fine and delicate instruments in the hands of operators who use them for a purpose other than that for which they were intended, produce no good results; not that they are incapable of doing so, but because they are not managed skilfully. It would have been better if such artificial aids had never been discovered, than that they should have been given over into the charge of those who are not fit to be entrusted with them. If their special training deprives them of the faculty of projecting their mental gaze beyond the elementary part of their subject on to the subject itself, it can readily be understood that their judgment, though vaunting itself to be more, will in reality be less reliable than that intuitively formed by those who have had no training at all. Had they never been cumbered with the burden of all this knowledge, they would have been further advanced than they are at present, for they would have become aware of their ignorance, and would thus have taken the first step towards the attainment of the knowledge which is desirable. But now they have to unlearn

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when their voice has gathered more strength and declares itself with no uncertain sound, these others, though tardily and reluctantly, will none the less surely come round in their views, and modify them so as to fit in with those which are approved by the majority. For, having no opinions which they can properly call their own, they have no firm ground to stand upon when left to themselves; but are easily persuaded to cast in their lot with whatever party happens to be in power. It is plain that they have never thoroughly grasped those views to which they affect to be so indissolubly attached. For as soon as they see that they are regarded by the majority as exploded, and that there is no longer any benefit to be derived from holding them, they at once relinquish them without scruple; and, leaving their own followers in the lurch when they have as yet hardly begun to waver in their allegiance, come and dwell under the shadow of what is now the orthodox view, but which, before it became established, was obstinately opposed by them as a dangerous innovation. Their frequent changes of front are not prompted by conviction, but by an indolent desire to move with the stream. They cannot endure to remain alone out in the cold, but choose to live in luxurious ease beneath the shelter ready provided for them, which, while it

was in process of erection, they did their best to demolish, but now that it is completed, they are the first to take advantage of it. Contented with a stagnant existence, and immersed in a selfish idleness, it never occurs to them to do for their successors what their predecessors have done for them, but, entrenching themselves on the heights of the fame acquired by others, from this point of vantage they seek to discourage the independent efforts of those who, relying only on their own merit, are striving from below to reach the summit. Then, when the struggle is at an end, and they see that further resistance will be unavailing, and that their trusted fortification is not inexpugnable, they have the effrontery to come forward and welcome open-armed as friends those who have proved themselves their too-powerful foes.

The ungracious reception, therefore, which these short-sighted dogmatists have accorded to the dramas of Ibsen, having been shown to be such as they are wont to extend to all independent works which have not as yet had time to become generally known, is in itself enough to raise a strong presumption of their merit, and the more so because, in Ibsen's case, the striking originality of his dramatic masterpieces has intensified this estrangement, and has evoked a vindictive feeling on their part which has been marked with unusual acerbity.

Indeed, with such unbridled fury has the storm of invective raged around these social dramas, that we may search throughout the whole history of literature without finding its parallel. But this violent downpour of abuse has spent itself in vain, and, having completely failed to accomplish the object to which it was directed, has ended in helping forward that which it sought to check.

So steadily are the dramas of Ibsen making headway in the face of all these adverse tendencies, that we could almost wish their progress into public favour had been somewhat more retarded. For just now we fear lest, if they continue to advance at their present rate, what is here said may come too late to be of any service, and that the position of affairs will have undergone such an alteration, that many of these words will no longer be applicable. For when we see them triumphing on every side, we feel, like Alexander when he received news of all the victories of Philip, that there will soon be nothing left to conquer. The compact and serried column of his opponents is not indeed dispersed, but it is hopelessly shattered; and, though the struggle is not yet over, there is now no longer any doubt as to how it will end.

Everywhere the signs of the times point in favour of Ibsen, and not the least favourable of them is

the fact of his having provoked this bitter critical hostility. Accordingly, the sacrifices being propitious, we may await the issue with a good heart. For had these social dramas met with the approval of the higher order of critics, we should have been inclined to suspect, even though none were apparent, that they must contain some latent radical defect. But, as it is, we are only confirmed in our previous good opinion of them. From whichever point of view we look at his case, the result is alike favourable to Ibsen. He is happy no less in having incurred the critical displeasure, than he is in having secured the popular estimation.

CHAPTER V.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF IBSEN'S DRAMAS.

WE now proceed to notice certain of those characteristics which peculiarly distinguish these dramas, and are likely to appear more especially striking to one who comes upon them for the first time. As our limited space will only allow us to include a few of these, we cannot hope to avoid passing over many which have arrested the attention of others. For the impression which these, or any other works, will leave upon a person's mind must depend largely upon what happens to be his individual temperament; so that there will always be much difference of opinion as to the relative importance of their several details. But, however much the opinions entertained by individuals may fluctuate, there are some points in connection with Ibsen's works which appeal more strongly than others to the great body of the public. We shall therefore content ourselves with singling out from them those traits which seem to be of common interest, and bestowing upon these a brief con-

sideration. For as the journey is sooner completed when the traveller is informed beforehand what he must be prepared to meet with on the way, to mention them here may assist those who have not yet examined these dramas for themselves.

Such a noteworthy feature is that which is presented to us in the subdued vein of finely-tempered satire which runs through all Ibsen's work. Beneath the literal meaning of his plainest expressions there often lurks a keen irony, which is none the less forcible because it is always kept under admirable control. But the very fact of its being so perfectly restrained sometimes causes it to be imperceptible to those who have not been forewarned, and are consequently not on the watch for it. By taking them simply as broad common-places, people often completely miss the meaning of many passages in these dramas; not that Ibsen has failed to make it sufficiently clear, but because they have not succeeded in appreciating the drift and tendency of his thoughts. To those who place themselves in sympathy with him, everything will be perfectly plain and simple. Ibsen never exacts too much from his audience, and if there are some people who are at a loss to perceive any special merit in his works, it is not fair to charge him with their lack of insight. No one can hope to understand these dramas unless he first

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fine the range of his selection to one privileged class he shows his ability as a dramatist, and his close acquaintance with all the varied phases of modern life. He is in touch with all the ills that await "man's feeble race," and the very diversity of the characters portrayed in these social dramas bears testimony to the width of his sympathies. They are felt to be drawn true to life; not modelled on the pattern of an exalted ideal, so as to be too far above the heads of the average audience for their words to evoke from them any genuine response.

From this we may gather how mistaken is that view according to which Ibsen's works are only to be appreciated by the cultured few. For the width of ground which they cover, the catholicity of thought which they display, and indeed all matters in connection with them go to show that the case is exactly the opposite. Their subjects are popular rather than select. They are not obscure and recondite, so as to demand any special knowledge from those who would understand them, but are such as appeal to the great body of the public. In spite of the constant disputing that is being carried on regarding them, it is an undeniable fact that these dramas are exceedingly simple; not only as regards their subject-matter, but also in their construction, so that they can easily be followed by

a popular audience. In them Ibsen has provided the words which give adequate expression to the thoughts which, in a more or less undefined form, are agitating the minds of the people of to-day. For not being able of themselves to crystallise the floating ideas which they are constantly revolving in their minds, they have need of someone to do this for them. This want Ibsen has supplied ; and, in consequence, the general public have quickly learnt to appreciate him, finding in him an interpreter of their thoughts. It is thus in every way made manifest how well adapted Ibsen's works are to meet the requirements of the present age, and that he himself is eminently an author for the people. The thoughts which they could not so far develop in their own minds as to give them a definite shape in words, he has formulated for them, and has made that plain and clear which was before vague and indistinct. For those who have long been striving to find expression for some new idea will at once recognise it when it is set before them, clothed with suitable language, without requiring anyone to point it out to them.

But while Ibsen draws the material out of which he constructs his dramas from the most ordinary sources, yet in his treatment of it he evinces extraordinary power. Such force of energy does he display, that he has pressed all the common

transactions of life into his service, and has contrived in a wonderful manner to infuse into them a vivid dramatic interest. The conflict of interests shown in the relations between employer and employed, and the formation of labour combinations; the effect of the introduction of newly-invented machinery, the ordinary dealings of commerce, the pompousness of civic pride, the self-satisfied dullness of the bourgeois class, and the manners of officials—all these and many similiar topics he has reduced for dramatic purposes beneath the sway of his powerful mind, and has breathed life into their dry bones. Anyone, therefore, who is familiar with the dealings of everyday life, will be able, without further experience, to enter fully into the spirit of his works.

But let it not be supposed that, because they treat of such matters as those we have mentioned, there is nothing more to be found in these dramas than a reflex of that business upon which people are accustomed to be engaged during the day. If such were the case, they would fairly be exposed to the cavil that people prefer to spend the short time in which they have leisure to devote themselves to literature upon works which afford them some relief and change from those matters which form their usual occupations; or, in short, that they like to leave their business behind them, not

to carry it with them to their homes. But the social dramas of Ibsen are something more than a mere echo of the street. In catering for the refreshment of a toil-worn public, he has not contented himself with serving up to it only an epitome of a day's doings, disguised by being cast into the dramatic form. Though it is true that he draws his subjects almost exclusively from the multifarious details of ordinary life, and finds these sources amply sufficient to supply him with all the material he requires, we need not be deterred from his dramas through fear of encountering in them anything that is reminiscent of the newspapers. Ibsen has not sacrificed literature to Mammon, by forcibly dragging in such matters contrary to the true spirit of drama, neither has he profaned the theatre, by converting it into a place of business for money-changers.

It is impossible for anyone to give a right estimate as to the merit of a work, when he knows no more of the subjects it deals with than their names. We can form no idea of the finished structure by only looking at the rough exterior of the unhewn material from which it is to be built up. These dramas indeed make constant reference to things with which everyone is familiar; but then they exhibit them to us from a different point of

view from that in which we have been accustomed to regard them, so that for the first time we come to understand their true significance. They shed a new light upon matters apparently trivial and of no importance, and give us an insight into the latent meaning which underlies what is outwardly dry and uninteresting.

Here we have additional proof, if more were required, of Ibsen's great dramatic ability. For he possesses a wondrous power, like that of which the alchemist dreamed in olden time, by which he draws the precious from the vile, and turns all the common things he touches into gold. When he waves his magic wand over the common events of life, they become completely transformed beneath the charm of his spell, and assume all kinds of new shapes, revealing to us a hidden beauty which before we had never even suspected. His great power of concentration enables him to expose the secret springs which set in action all the complex machinery of modern life; and, with the aid of the works which he has given us, we may steer an even course without fear of being involved in that modern Scylla and Charybdis, which threatens us in the clash of jarring interests. He has put us in possession of the clue by which we can safely tread our way amid the most perplexing intrigues, and trace them through all their

intricate windings to the source from which they derive their origin.

Although such matters as these may appear to be too hopelessly complicated ever to be brought within the domain of literature, yet, provided the author is possessed of sufficient penetration to strike at their root, there are no human actions which its sphere is not wide enough to compass. For the strangest deeds are easily explained, when once we have been made acquainted with the motives by which they are instigated. Without having these works before our eyes, we might not unreasonably have been disposed to doubt whether such matters could be adapted as subjects for the drama; but now that we have actually seen them turned to such admirable account, we have no other alternative than simply to note the fact. For since we cannot gainsay the testimony of our own eyesight, we are obliged to acknowledge their suitability. It is idle for anyone to talk about them not lending themselves to dramatic treatment, or to deny the possibility of constructing a drama out of such material; for to all these objections there is one short and sufficient answer, namely, that the thing has been done. Let us, therefore, to use the oft-quoted saying, believe one who has made a practical trial of these things.

It is this feature of Ibsen's work that marks and proclaims it as being a new and original type of literature. He derives his subject-matter from a source which has never been drawn upon for dramatic purposes before. Through his having brought such ordinary transactions within the scope of drama, he is enabled to appeal to a larger public, and consequently to achieve for his works a greater measure of success. For, provided it be skilfully treated, the wider the range that the subject of a drama covers, the more numerous will be the audience that it will attract. We may call such matters common, and unworthy of a place in a great work; but then common matters are of common interest, and the dramatist finds in them the means of reaching the ears of many who would not otherwise have listened to him. It is in this respect that Ibsen's work shows a distinct advance upon that of his predecessors. His dramas may be looked upon as ushering in a new era in the history of literature, inasmuch as in them we first find a departure from the older methods, and the introduction of others in their stead more suited to satisfy the demands of a modern audience.

For some time past it has been generally felt that the drama in its conventional form has been losing its hold upon the people, and that it requires the introduction of certain vital changes in order

to bring it into accord with existing social conditions, and prevent its falling behind in following the course of modern developments. For if it is to be preserved in public favour, it must be made to keep pace with the times. Now, in the dramas which Ibsen has produced, and which have been conceived thoroughly in the spirit of the present age, we find that such needed reforms have been effected, in the direction of greater simplicity and the abandonment of rhetorical ornament, as are calculated to restore a perfect harmony between the drama and the people. For, instead of clinging to a lofty seat and from thence straining every nerve to draw the people up to him, he has gone down from his pedestal to associate with them upon their own level, and has condescended to accommodate himself to their understanding, by presenting them with matters with which they are familiar. His dramas are undoubtedly original, his methods peculiar to himself. Others have sought for some great action to commemorate, but Ibsen selects those which are common and ordinary by preference. For when people are introduced into the presence of a set of characters whom they instinctively feel to be out of sympathy with themselves, the lofty sentiments to which they may give expression awaken no responsive chord within their hearts. They quickly become

aware that the sphere of action in which they move is not theirs, nor one to which they are ever likely to attain; and accordingly, while they treat them with respect and deference, they yet prefer to keep out of their way as much as possible.

The adoption of such a distant attitude goes far to explain many failures in literature, and it is perhaps due to this cause that what are commonly known as "the best books" possess but small attraction for the majority of people. Since Cervantes despatched the worthy Don Quixote to the limbo of departed heroes, the knights and ladies of chivalry have ceased to exert that fascination over the popular mind which they formerly possessed, and their miraculous adventures have no longer any charm for the sterilised imagination of this practical age. Their place upon the world's stage has been filled by others, whose more sober mode of living presents nothing particularly remarkable to the chronicler. But because the activities of mankind have been curtailed in one direction, they have not therefore been confined altogether. Human energy has found a vent in fresh channels, and displays itself in actions which, though less outwardly romantic, are perhaps none the less significant. To the eye of the superficial observer there is nothing of value to be derived

from this material, but in capable hands it may be made to yield abundant interest.

Accordingly, the dramatist of the present day who would have his words listened to with attention by his hearers, must put them into the mouths of characters whom they will feel to be like themselves. For in the presence of their equals people are not abashed to enter with zest upon a discussion which, before their superiors, they would have avoided altogether. Beneath the weight of constraint they preserve a rigid silence, but when once it is removed they can be induced to speak freely without much effort. To remove this weight, therefore, should be the prime object of the dramatist. For as long as it is felt to be hanging overhead, there will be no joy at the intellectual banquet; and sooner or later it will certainly descend with fatal force, and give the death-blow to his drama. Where they are subjected to any constraint, even of the slightest kind, people will not voluntarily assemble for the sake of amusement.

We may thus form some idea of the pleasant relations which Ibsen has established between himself and his public by making use of this common material. Out of it he has constructed a commodious edifice, containing sufficient room to seat any number, and where all receive a

hearty welcome. A popular audience, on entering the place which Ibsen has thus provided for its reception, is likely to feel more at its ease than if it had been admitted into the palatial splendour of those more pretentious edifices, which others have erected for its accommodation. For where their senses are dazzled by the display of such imposing magnificence, the beholders become oppressed with a feeling of awe and wonder, and are deprived of power to exercise a proper discrimination among the various objects they encounter; but where they are presented with nothing unusual, they never lose their natural elasticity of spirits. No previous knowledge of formalities is necessary, and they can move freely without coming upon anything to disconcert them. The words which they hear are such as they can readily understand, being spoken from the mouths of characters like those whom they are accustomed to meet and deal with in ordinary life. By their agency, Ibsen can compel the multitude to deliberate, not only upon the burning questions with which they are immediately concerned, but even upon those which are usually regarded as being purely academic, and which no one would have dreamed that they could ever have been induced to entertain. For so long as he engrosses their attention, he is the master of their thoughts, and

may divert them into whatever channel he pleases. This submission, however, is not wrung from them by force; but they themselves, in the very fact of their consenting to fix their minds upon the scene which he displays before them, acknowledge that they are for the time being under his direction.

It is evident, therefore, that it is of much higher importance for the dramatist that his words should excite the interest of his hearers, than that they should receive their entire acquiescence. However noble be his purpose, if he cannot arouse their minds from the slumber of apathy, he will never be able to convey to them his meaning. If they have no desire to hear the question, they will not care to be told its answer. In order that any eagerness should be felt to know its result, the debate must be fought out through all its varying aspects in the presence of the spectators, and the conflicting arguments so skilfully set in array, that when they are confronted with each other, their full force becomes at once apparent. When the attention of all has thus become absorbed in watching the development of the action, the dramatist will then be in a position to fully elicit those points which he wishes to establish, and to bring his meaning home to the understanding of his hearers; so that, although they may not adopt the exact view which he himself would indicate, they at least

will not hold aloof altogether, but will take part with one side or the other.

But after he has once made them realise the position to which he has been leading up, the dramatist's task is at an end. He has fulfilled all that was required of him, and nothing further now remains for him to do. If he prolongs the action, in order to expatiate upon the superiority of any particular view and to insist upon its being received as correct, he oversteps his functions. He is a dramatist no longer, but has lapsed into the rôle of the conventional preacher. All that is required of him is to set the conclusion he arrives at clearly before his audience, and, having done this, to leave it in their hands, to accept or reject as they please. For in the drama there is nothing that savours of compulsion, and every effort to exercise authority over or to enslave the mind is repugnant to its true spirit. People are free to welcome what is said, or to spurn it aside; for the dramatist, it is sufficient that they should not be indifferent to it.

All this is fully borne out by the example of Ibsen's dramas, where the action never flags, and the scene never loses its interest. His words are invariably suggestive, and open up all kinds of questions. They may not be always approved, but they certainly will never pass unnoticed. There is no

fear of their lulling the audience to sleep ; for they produce such a disturbing effect upon the minds of all that hear them, that they make them feel as if they were themselves taking part in the events they behold, and were actually engaged in the discussion which is being carried on before them.

If, therefore, Ibsen does not always convince his hearers, he must at least be credited with having provoked them to examine for themselves what they were before content to take upon trust. For to hold an opinion of some kind on a subject is preferable to remaining in absolute ignorance with regard to it. The person of enquiring mind, who accepts nothing without first looking into it, is further advanced than one who is ready to incorporate unhesitatingly into his system whatever is presented to him on a good recommendation. The mind does not cast anchor in the harbour of certainty till it has first been tossed upon the sea of doubt. Its settled state implies a previous disturbance. When, therefore, we begin to doubt, we take the first step towards establishing reliable convictions. Those which are formed in any other way possess no stability, for how can we feel any assurance in things which we have never proved ? That is a false security of opinion which rests upon an unexamined foundation. It is only by being subjected to the test of doubt that knowledge can

be reduced to certainty. Accordingly, by shaking the general confidence in views which before had never been called in question, Ibsen has done much good. For, when the ferment of opinions which has been aroused by his dramas has settled down, it will be found to have expelled many a delusion and to have left behind it many a valuable truth. By means of that lively human interest which the new methods he has adopted enable him to excite, he has succeeded in investing his works with a wonderful attraction for the people, and has thus carried out in its full extent what should be the dramatist's mission. For the drama is above all things popular in its aim. Indeed, we may say that the success of the dramatist wholly depends on his being able to create a mutual sympathy between his audience and his characters.

It is a mistake to suppose that a great work must have what is commonly termed a great subject, though it is one which is so natural that it may readily be excused. For the very fact of a work professing a lofty aim and dealing with matters of great import, leads us to an assumption, which is, however, quite unwarranted, that it is entitled as of course to rank above one with a lower and humbler theme. But in forming our judgment, we must not be influenced by the outward appearance of the raw material which the

author has seen fit to make use of, but by the ability which he has displayed in treating it. For it is possible that the higher structure may be erected upon the lower foundation. Starting from the level of what is apparently trivial and commonplace, the skilful dramatist will often reach a pinnacle which others, who have based their works upon the loftiest subjects, have never been able to attain.

For a person to be deceived by the sound of a title-page is an error more common than is often supposed. Thus we hear the "Paradise Lost" of Milton preferred to the "Orlando Furioso" of Ariosto, on the ground that the superior dignity of the subject-matter in the former work must necessarily give it precedence to the latter, with its grotesque fables derived from classic myth and heathen superstition, and its strange admixture of things sacred and profane, the whole being attempered to the ecclesiastical teaching of the time in a manner so characteristic of the Renaissance. But in all such cases, as we have said, the treatment is primarily to be considered. In the same way also it is argued that an author of tragedies must always take a higher place than one who has confined himself to comedy. But unless it is that, being naturally of a serious disposition, we believe that it is better to be grave than gay,

it does not seem altogether clear why we should prefer either of the sister-muses to the other.

The many obvious advantages which the new methods introduced by Ibsen possess over those previously in vogue, did not long remain undiscovered by dramatists, for we find this peculiar characteristic of his works attracting their attention from the first more than any other feature they present. It was at once recognised that a far wider measure of success would be likely to accrue to a drama constructed on such lines, provided that its author, in bringing these common transactions into the plot, could by some means contrive to do this without committing any violence to literature. The methods were freely admitted to be good in theory, but there still remained some doubt as to whether it would be possible to put them into practice. But this has now been so clearly demonstrated by the fame which Ibsen has achieved, that it is not surprising to find others treading in his steps. The advent of his dramas has brought about a revival in a branch of literature which had fallen into neglect, and has given a fresh impetus to follow a pursuit which had been somewhat discredited. Already a host of imitators has arisen, particularly in Germany, where the dramatists who have adopted Ibsen's analytical method form a new school which

is daily coming into greater prominence. Their works are, as a rule, to be distinguished by two main features; in the first place, by their having the affairs of humble life interwoven into the texture of their plots; and, in the second, by an often overstrained effort, in portraying the conditions of society, to present the reverse as well as the front of the picture. But, though there are exceptions, some of them at least can hardly be said to have done much to advance these methods in the public estimation. In their anxiety not to conceal the ugliness of life from their audience, they have thrust it too prominently before them, and their characters often overdo their part. They have not brought sufficient force to bear upon their subject-matter to purge away its outward dulness, and reveal the secrets which it has wrapt up within it. It would seem that Ibsen's master-hand alone is possessed of the requisite skill and delicacy to carve out of such unpromising material anything of lasting value. Others have, for the most part, done no more than bear witness to his success. For, while in their efforts to follow these methods they confess that their originator has turned them to good account, their failures show that they lack the power to make them profitable to themselves.

Altogether, Ibsen's position in relation to the literature of the present day may justly be

regarded as unique. In his own department he stands alone and unrivalled. It is true that there have been trespassers upon this field, but, finding it uncongenial to their tastes, and being unable to establish any permanent abode upon it, they have speedily taken their departure, and left him in undisputed possession. Between Ibsen and his imitators there is nothing essential in common. The subject-matter, indeed, is the same in both cases, but the method of treatment is widely different, and so also are the results obtained.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NATURE OF DRAMA ILLUSTRATED FROM ITS ANCIENT AND MODERN HISTORY.

IN dealing with this subject, there is need of constant care lest, by too much theorising, we should fetter the drama with undue restrictions. The author has a perfect right to draw his material from any source he pleases, provided he has the power to make it amenable to the conditions which literature requires to be satisfied, and all injunctions to restrain or to curtail this right in any way are to be resisted as purely arbitrary. No one can assume to limit the subjects of drama to one special class. It comprehends within its scope everything that is of human interest, and it was a dramatist who gave us the well-known words,—“I am a man, nothing therefore pertaining to mankind I consider as alien to me.” Whatever, then, may form the subject of a human action may also form the subject of a drama.

It is on account of these far-reaching aims and its widely-diffused influence that the drama has at

all times been so potent an instrument in helping to break down the barriers betwixt classes, and in bringing different kinds of people into contact with each other. It opposes itself to all factious tendencies ; destroying narrow cliques, and annihilating artificial distinctions, in order to establish in their place a wider and more healthy social intercourse. For a policy of contraction makes a community degenerate, but a policy of expansion invariably brings about for it a fuller development. It is of the very essence of drama that it appeals, not to a few of its members only, but to the whole body of the public ; and within the walls of the theatre, when the lights are turned down and the eyes of all centred upon the same scene, people of every sort and condition, however diverse in character and pursuits they may be from one another in the outer world, are for a brief while drawn together by a bond of union, through beholding actions which excite a common sympathy in them all. The separate divisions reserved for the different sections of the audience, as contrasted with the one spectacle which is presented to the general view, may be considered as typical of this. For between the people who compose the various distinctive groups there appears to be no connection to the eye, but, inasmuch as they are all interested in following the same course of events, they are drawn

together in thought. Though severed from one another in the auditorium, all meet together on the stage. For they do not confine their thoughts to the divisions within which they sit, but project them out on to the scene before them; which, so long as it commands their attention, holds all alike bound beneath one common spell. Certainly the illusion is of short duration. The vision speedily dissolves, and everything resumes its wonted aspect. We are once more in the presence of the realities of life, and return everyone to his own affairs.

But perhaps it may be after all that the true reality is not so clearly to be discerned in the turmoil of the outer world, as it is in the enchanted land of the drama. It is a mistake to regard all its magic scenes as nothing but an empty show, whose charm, when the curtain falls, has for ever vanished and passed into the shadows of oblivion. It is possible for the visionary to approach nearer to the truth than the actual; says Goethe:—

“What I possess as from afar I see,
Those I have lost become realities to me;”

and from the mirror which the drama holds up to life we may get a deeper insight into its meaning, than is to be derived from watching its whirling stream without.

There is also another aspect in which the drama challenges our attention, which arises from the

peculiarity of its being the only form of literature which has preserved its originally oral character. While from one point of view altogether intolerant of restrictions of any kind, it appears from another to be most exacting in its requirements. For whether they be all thought applicable or no, it will hardly be denied that there have been more special rules laid down for the composition of drama than for any other form of literature. In laying the foundation of his work, there are all kinds of precautions which it is necessary for the dramatist to take, and during the whole time of its construction he must be constantly on the watch lest he lose sight of those leading principles that govern all his operations ; besides all which, there are countless minor points which it is important that he should not miss. To produce a drama with any pretensions to literary merit, which at the same time may possess an attraction for a popular audience, entails such minute care in composition, and the satisfaction of so many conditions, that the numerous failures to combine these two features may easily be understood. There is little room for the dramatist to indulge his own fancy in moulding his work to whatever size or shape he pleases. During the whole course of its development the drama has changed very slightly as to its outward appearance. It has forms of its own prescribed for

it, which have been in use since time immemorial, and from which it is dangerous to depart. Compared with other types of literature, it offers but few opportunities for variety of treatment. As to length also, there is a normal standard to which dramas for the most part closely adhere. They constitute a well-defined class of literature in themselves; being sharply distinguished from all other works by characteristics which are easily recognised, and by virtue of certain rules to which it is essential that they should comply.

All these things seem at first sight to be out of keeping with that oral nature, which we have premised as being a distinctive mark of drama. At first one would certainly be inclined to think that the obedience of rule was more likely to be a characteristic of the written than of the spoken word. For to say of any work that it is of an oral nature implies that all the words used should proceed in a perfectly natural manner from the mouths of the characters who take part in it, and should sound as if they were being spoken in ordinary conversation, rather than as if read from a written treatise. But because the drama has a rigorous code of laws and demands a thorough submission to these from all who desire to really excel in it and to reach the first degree of eminence, this is no argument to be advanced in proof

of its being artificial. It is true that literature which is primarily written usually betrays on its face many signs of attempts having been made to conform to recognised canons, while in that which is primarily oral it is often impossible to detect the influence of these at all, there being no outward indication of even so much as a thought ever having been paid to them. But we have before had occasion to show that this spontaneity of utterance, so far from being in any way incompatible with the obedience of rule, is in fact the natural outcome of it. No concession must be made to the prevalent opinion that conformance to fixed standards necessitates artificiality. For this perfect freedom from the fetters of form which is required in drama, can be ensured in no other way than by a faithful allegiance to its laws, which, however, is not the result of effort, but must be rendered naturally. Those who urge that this very spontaneity of utterance in itself denies the consciousness of rule, say what is very true. But they go a step too far when they infer from this that rules are not observed in literature whose character is primarily oral. For the obedience which is unconscious is of the highest order of all.

Our proposition, therefore, that the drama is on the one hand the most cumbered with rules,

and on the other the least artificial of all kinds of literature, which at first appeared so strange, turns out, when examined, to be the most natural of all things. At the entrance we are beset with distressing formalities, but when once we have made our way into the interior, we find that all restraint has been abandoned. The fact of its presenting these two features side by side is no anomaly, notwithstanding their apparent inconsistency; for the one may be deduced from the other as its natural consequence.

The drama cannot exist in fetters, and abhors a state of slavery. In a generous soil it will spring up of its own accord, and beneath the sun of an exuberant life and liberty, it will expand to its highest perfection; but the most painstaking endeavours to foster its growth by artificial means, or to force its development like that of an exotic plant confined within some hot-house, will all be bestowed to no purpose. It will never flourish unless it be left to itself in a free and open atmosphere, and allowed to run its own course without hindrance. If it be hedged within narrow limits which choke and hamper its growth, and be jealously tended and nurtured lest it should come into contact with the outside world, it will only pine and die.

So far, then, from the drama being unaffected

by its outward surroundings, its very existence depends on their being favourable, as the life of the individual on his finding a suitable environment. It is the general opinion that there is nothing to prevent a dramatist coming before the public at any period of a nation's history; that he is as likely to arise at one time as at any other, no matter what be the state of the country to which he owes his birth, and that whether he does or does not is purely a matter of chance. But just as the character of the individual is tempered and modified by his environment, so is all literature, and especially the drama, affected by its national surroundings. For the dramatist, whose whole object is to give life-like representations of human actions, cannot sever himself from all intercourse with mankind as though his genius were sufficient in itself. If it never happened to be revealed by some influence from without, the very fact of his possessing such capabilities would remain a secret, not only to others, but even to himself. Moreover, in order to draw them out to their full extent, this outward impulse must be such as to strike the mind with a force proportionate to its inward powers; for the effect is never more than the exact equivalent of the cause, and it is impossible for anyone to be conscious of a power which he has never had an

opportunity of exercising. Inherent qualities can only be brought out by means of a mutual interaction, and it is contrary to all natural principles that a full development should be reached in isolation.

The national drama of a country is always the spontaneous product of its own soil, and flourishes better in it than anywhere else. When introduced into a place where there is no suitable ground prepared for its reception, it will never take root. However vigorous and luxuriant its growth in its native spot, if it be transplanted to a climate different from that in which it originally grew up, it falls at once into decay. The connection between the drama and its surroundings is so close that it really amounts to an interdependence, the smallest change in the one being accompanied by a corresponding change in the other. It is therefore indispensable for the development of a national drama that the people should at the time have shaken themselves free from the yoke of oppression, and be animated with the spirit of liberty. These are the unmistakable signs that herald an outburst of dramatic activity, and in all the recorded instances the same concomitants are invariably present.

To show that this is so, we intend to take a brief and cursory historical survey of the drama in so

far as it helps to illustrate our argument, neither do we think it at all necessary to offer any apology for so doing. For to leave such statements alone and unsupported is to expose them to contradiction from anyone, and we are therefore obliged to turn to the pages of history and cite examples from them in proof of our contention. On subjects like these all kinds of views may be put forward, many of them being diametrically opposed to each other, and until there has been a reference to facts, we have no means of distinguishing the true from the false. Our own sense of their fitness and probability is not by itself a sufficiently reliable guide. We can never be sure of the correctness of a judgment formed solely from outward impressions. However sound it may be in appearance, an examination of the grounds upon which it is based will frequently lead to its entire reversal, by upsetting arguments which seemed to be exceedingly plausible, and ratifying those at first considered as wholly improbable. We therefore welcome the appeal to history, as giving us an opportunity of firmly establishing our position. For while it is the great safeguard against purely fanciful theories, it is also the infallible touchstone by which we may approve the truth of well-founded assertions.

In accordance, then, with the principle which we have laid down in a former chapter, we shall com-

mence our enquiry by reverting to some ancient manifestations of drama, and, after having examined these, we shall bring them into contrast with those which have occurred in modern times, and consider how far past and present harmonise with each other, and whether they exhibit any points of resemblance which may help to elucidate this subject. For, by aid of the light which the one period throws upon the other, and by bringing the two, as it were, under one focus, we hope to be able to make it clearly seen that it is of the utmost importance for the success of the dramatist that his national surroundings should be favourable.

There is no reason why anyone should grudge us permission to follow this procedure, or should take offence as though we were carrying back our enquiry to times too remote from the present to throw any light upon it. We cannot shorten this investigation by conducting it on any other plan. Though we adopt the alternative method of "plunging into the midst of things," we shall have to return to the beginning before we can reach the end. If we are to give a proper account of these matters, we must be allowed to trace them from their origin, and, moreover, it is to be noted that the very word "drama," as it stands, is Hellenic.

Let us, therefore, recur to the history of that city where the drama flourished in its greatest

splendour, and see what information bearing upon this point is to be gleaned by searching amongst its annals. For it was at Athens that the drama was cultivated to the highest pitch of development to which it was capable of being carried. Here it found an environment admirably suited to exhibit all its varied features in their full perfection. This was the home which could satisfy all its manifold wants, where it particularly loved to dwell, and where it made a long stay. So exactly did its character agree with that of the people, that they seemed to be mutually adapted for each other, and the fact of its being among them that it reached its highest development affords strong proof of the importance of this reciprocity.

Now, what was the condition of Athens when this outburst of dramatic activity took place? We know that, in the period immediately preceding this, the city was governed by the tyrants, and, during the time that the people were subjected to their oppression, history, though it has much to say of other forms of literature, is altogether silent as to drama. No public representations appear to have been given, and there are no outward signs to show that it even existed. But in the period which followed the expulsion of the tyrants, during which the citizens of Athens enjoyed the greatest measure of constitutional liberty that it would be

possible for any man to possess, there took place simultaneously a great extension of their dominion and a sudden outburst of dramatic activity.

We cannot think that these two things had no connection with each other, but are irresistibly led to look upon this increase of power accompanied by the appearance of drama as a phenomenon which has its explanation in that spirit of freedom and independence with which the people were then animated, and which was consequent upon the removal of a previous oppression. This spirit found its natural utterance in the drama, just as the bird, which remains mute when confined in the captivity of a cage, bursts forth into continuous and unrestrained song when liberated into the open expanse of air. Listen to the words of the great contemporary historian, who has handed down to us an account of this stirring period. Referring to these events he says,—

“It is evident, not in a particular instance only, but in every way, what an excellent thing it is that there should be an equality of rights. For when the Athenians were governed by tyrants, they were superior to none of their neighbours in war; but when they were delivered from tyrants, they became by far the first. It is thus clear that as long as they were oppressed they behaved as cowards on purpose, because they were working

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This unwieldy army was, however, no match for the better organised forces of the Hellenes. It was ignominiously defeated, and forced to retire into Asia with great loss and in much confusion. Thus the Athenians showed once again how vigorously they could act, and how great were the sacrifices they were prepared for, when their liberty was at stake; so that from the part they took in these events they earned for themselves the title of "the saviours of Hellas."

So long as this enterprising spirit existed among them, the people went on further extending their dominion over sea and land, and the drama, in like manner, continued to rise to a higher pitch of development; but when the vigour of their independence declined, the brightness of their power became dimmed, and the splendour of the drama also gradually waned and diminished. It was the same cloud which overshadowed them both. The drama was, in fact, the picture in which all the varying phases of the life of the people were portrayed, and by looking at it we can tell what was their condition at any given time. The very existence of the drama was bound up in the civic life. It was the wealthier citizens who undertook the burden of supplying it with its accessories, orchestral choral and decorative. While the public finances were in good

condition, dramas were produced on a sumptuous and liberal scale; but when they became embarrassed, the representations were both fewer and less expensively mounted. As their surroundings became unfavourable, the dramatists also began to display less ability. For since they always composed with an audience before their minds' eye, when it was no longer appreciative, their work naturally degenerated, and at last their productiveness ceased altogether. There was no fit environment for the support of dramas, and by a wise economy of nature no dramatist arose.

Now, the distinctive trait in the character of the Athenians being their attachment for liberty, it is a significant circumstance that they should have cultivated the drama more highly than any other branch of literature. The poetry of Athens has achieved a world-wide fame which has never been surpassed, yet her three greatest poets were all dramatists. The oral nature of this form of literature, and the scope it afforded for spontaneous utterance which made it capable of giving expression to all their varying moods, caused it to be particularly in favour with a people of their quick and vivacious temperament. When, therefore, we are told that the drama reached its highest perfection among a people of this disposition, we have a sure index of its essential qualities,

and of the kind of soil in which it is most likely to flourish. The nature of the drama is revealed in the life of the people, and again the drama, in its turn, reflects back to us and still further illustrates their disposition. The service rendered by the one is reciprocated by the other, so that to understand the nature of the drama is to understand the character of the Athenians. Their just sense of proportion made the obedience of all its complex rules come perfectly easy and natural to them, while its wild and joyous dances, its music, and above all the absence from it of everything artificial, were in thorough accord with their love of freedom. In the great models of Hellenic drama, perfect obedience to rule and perfect freedom from restraint are found side by side.

How many advantages has the spoken over the written word, and what extra opportunities it affords for bringing home the full force of its meaning! Here we have living words, breathing with the freshness of changing expression, enforced in action, set off by suitable gesture, and illustrated by accordant surroundings; instead of dumb and lifeless letters set down in cold and monotonous type, where we miss the voice with its delicate variations of tone to interpret them. The well-known remark that we do not so well remember what we hear with the ear as what we see with

the eye, expressed the sentiment of a Roman, and would never have been uttered by a Hellene. The contrast between the two peoples is very instructive in this connection, and throws an additional light upon the position we wish to establish. Among the Hellenes in the height of their prosperity there existed a perfect freedom; at Rome in its golden age the majestic and overshadowing presence of the Emperor everywhere made itself felt. The Court patronage of the Cæsars, though its fostering influence was most beneficial to other kinds of literature, failed to produce a national drama. The sumptuous magnificence of the imperial palace was not a suitable atmosphere for its development. Such drama as did exist was quite distinct from the classic literature of the golden age, and flourished in a totally different environment. Thus we see that where literature was dependent upon Court patronage, however munificent, and upon the recognition of a small class, however cultured, no dramatic activity could be aroused; but where it looked to the mass of the people for its support, and where there existed an enterprising spirit of independence, dramas would spontaneously arise as the natural expression of this.

But though the drama of Hellas is the drama *par excellence*, and was the great glory of Athens, the attention which we rightly bestow upon it

must not lead us to think that there were no other people in the world in ancient times who cultivated this form of literature. The drama did not confine itself to a single spot, or fix its abode among one race of mankind only; but visited other places also, whenever the surroundings were favourable for its reception. Leaving Europe behind, let us now extend our enquiry into Asia, and see whether we can learn anything further, from the history of its countries, as to the environment which is required for the production of a national drama.

Thanks to the wider circulation which has of late years been given to good Oriental translations, the splendid drama of the Hindus has now been made familiar to us, which reached its highest development at a period removed from our own by the space of nearly two thousand years. A fine specimen of these Hindu dramas, and perhaps the best known of them all, is the "Sakountala" of Kalidasa, the reputation of which extends throughout Europe. It has been praised by Goethe, has served as the subject of opera, and is universally acknowledged to belong to the highest rank of literature. However, this is but one of a large number composed by this author, and besides him there were numerous other distinguished dramatists who flourished in the same age, many of whose works are still extant. Those which have been

brought to light possess a merit which is unquestionable, and will fully repay the most earnest attention that may be bestowed upon them.

On turning to history to ascertain the then-existing state of the country, we find that these dramas were produced during the period which immediately followed the victories obtained by the illustrious Hindu monarch Vikramaditya, over the savage tribes of Tartars, by whom the land of Hindustan had been overrun. These marauders, in the course of those raids which they were in the habit of making during the whole time between the invasion of Alexander and the Mohammedan conquest, pouring down from the North, had in the period preceding his accession encroached considerably upon the Hindu territory, and, as they continued to maintain their footing upon it, the people had suffered greatly from their ravages. But as soon as he came to the throne, he succeeded in driving back these barbarous hordes beyond the Indus; and, having liberated the people from their yoke, he consolidated the kingdom upon a firm and stable foundation, and ruled in a liberal and enlightened spirit. These victories were the initiation of a brilliant era, and in the various departments of literature great productiveness was displayed, but especially in the drama. Here again we have a distinct example of an outburst of dramatic activity,

occurring at a time of national vigour and prosperity among a people who had just regained their liberty after having been previously subjected to oppression.

It would have been impossible in those times for one people to have borrowed their drama from another, but all such outbursts must have arisen independently. The epithet "national," so often applied to the drama, shows that it cannot be introduced from any foreign source, but that its growth must be spontaneous. It would be absurd to suppose that it was first invented in one country, and was afterwards passed on from this into all the rest, like the signal fires of Agamemnon. The drama is a type of literature which has its origin, not in invention, but in nature. The testimony of history entirely contradicts the supposition that all dramatic activity radiates from one centre; for it is found occurring among people of altogether different racial characteristics, whose territories were widely separated from each other, so that, even had they wished to be brought into mutual contact, there could have been no general interchange of ideas, owing to the means of communication being then so inferior. Again, there are often long intervals between these outbreaks, and in the intervening time dramatic life appears to have become altogether extinct. It would seem as if the genius of drama, like any other visitation, cannot manifest itself in

two countries at once, but migrates from place to place. We do not know of any instance of two great outbursts which were actually simultaneous. Though there have been cases of a dramatic activity happening in two countries during the same age, yet that which has been the period of its efflorescence in the one has been the period of its decadence in the other.

Imitation corresponds to a natural instinct, belonging, not to one people only, but to the whole human race. Because it may long remain dormant it is not, therefore, to be considered as non-existent, for it only needs to be awakened by some sufficiently powerful influence from without in order to declare itself in action. This dramatic instinct, being thus inborn, cannot fail to assert itself in man when the quickening circumstances arise to call it forth, unless his spirit be unnaturally bowed down beneath the weight of servitude.

The Chinese are known to have always been, as they are also now, a most exclusive race, and particularly jealous of outside interference. They would hardly be likely to borrow their literature from other countries at a time when, even among these, cosmopolitan influences had not as yet begun to be felt. The author who introduced into his work anything taken from a foreign source would have probably met with but a very indifferent

success, for he would at once have alienated the sympathies of his hearers. No one, it is presumed, would wish to dispute that the literature of China is peculiarly its own. But, though it may provoke a smile, it is, nevertheless, undeniable that the Chinese possess a great national drama. Opportunities have lately been extended for making the acquaintance of some of these works by the means of translations; one, for example, is that entitled "Laou Seng Urh," or "The Heir in Old Age," the merit of which is undoubted; another is "The Orphan of Chao," which has supplied the basis of Voltaire's "L'Orphelin de la Chine."

The dramatic instinct is accordingly proved to be one of those which nature has implanted in man at his birth, and to be the common possession of the whole family of mankind. The drama thus affords the natural outlet for a certain class of human feelings. Though manifesting itself in different ways among people of diverse habits, and at periods far distant from each other, its main characteristics are always the same, thus showing that its rules are not arbitrary, but have their root in nature. It is also impossible to produce dramas by any artificial means. They are not made to order, neither can they be purchased with money. Dramatic outbursts are invariably spontaneous, and before they can take place in

any country, a suitable environment must first have arisen.

Passing now from ancient to modern times, we shall find history repeating itself among the countries of Europe during the period following the Renaissance. This was the time when the world awoke from its long slumber, and, as the gloom of the dark ages became dispelled, it seemed to renew its youth. The imagination of the people was fired at the prospects of the newly-discovered lands which were laid open to their enterprise, and their thoughts, being diverted into these new channels, ceased altogether to run in those well-worn grooves to which they had been for so many centuries confined. It is difficult for us now to realise what an immense difference there is between the ideas then current in the world and those of the present day, although, in point of time, the two periods are, comparatively speaking, but a little removed from each other. The straitened limits within which people moved and thought, their contracted vision, the attitude they adopted towards all those natural phenomena which no science had yet arisen to explain, and which they regarded with a certain awe as unapproachable mysteries; their inaccurate conception of the world, and imperfect notions regarding the countries that lay beyond seas

as yet untraversed—all these things make it necessary for us to exercise our imaginative powers to their full extent, in order to place ourselves in their position. When, therefore, these clouds of ignorance dissolved, and people began to throw away those shackles with which they had been hampered for so long, it is not surprising that the release from this thralldom should be succeeded by a sudden and wonderful activity. Their reaction in the direction of liberty was proportionate to the rigour of their previous imprisonment. As the range of investigation became widened and fresh fields of enquiry were opened up, the minds of the people expanded, and the whole tone of human thought underwent a complete change. Men were everywhere bursting their bonds, and emerging forth out of the darkness of their gloomy prisons into the light of the free and open atmosphere beyond. Their energies displayed themselves with all the greater force because of the length of time for which they had been previously suppressed. The old limits of thought and action were altogether too narrow to contain this ferment of ideas, and failed to provide adequate scope for the stirring activity that was being exhibited on every side. They completely gave way under the pressure which so great an agitation brought to bear upon them,

and left the passage clear between the old and the new world.

All those discoveries, of which we now think so little, and which we take as a matter of course, seemed marvellous in the eyes of the people who then lived. It was the time of the "Great Instauration," and men refused to be any longer confined by the Pillars of Herakles. This spirit of universal awakening breathes in all the literature of the age, and from it we may even now catch something of the fervour of its active spirit. In the following stanza, taken from Tasso's "Jerusalem Delivered," we seem to feel the reflected glow from the fire of the energy which then pervaded mankind:—

"The time shall come when the fable of the Pillars of Herakles shall be disregarded by enterprising sailors. Seas remote and without name, and kingdoms yet unknown, shall then become renowned; the bold pioneer of all future ships shall circumnavigate whate'er the sea surrounds or the stars shine upon, and, in its victorious course, shall take the measure of the stupendous circle of the earth, and rival the career of the sun."

And, again, the thought of the discovery of America prompts the words:—

"Thou, Columbus, shalt set thy happy sails towards a new sphere."

The same adventurous spirit inspires the "Lusiad" of Camoens, the hero of which is Vasco da Gama, another of the great discoverers of that age, who accomplished the voyage to India.

What a contrast is revealed to us, when we compare the enterprising tone of this modern thought with that which colours the following passage from Pindar:—

"Toward the gloom beyond Gadeira 'tis not allowed to cross; set the sails of the ship back again to the dry land of Europe."

It was not that the men of his time were less bold and daring than those of later days, but they were restrained from venturing further because they felt that to go forth into this wider world was more than what was appointed for them to accomplish. They would have regarded it as a kind of impiety to extend their enquiries beyond what were recognised in ancient times as the bounds of the universe. They contemplated these undiscovered regions with a sense of awe, and their scruples forbade them to make any attempt to explore them.

But at the time of which we speak all such misgivings had been entirely swept aside. Everything seemed to have become new, and the whole face of the earth to have been rejuvenated. In all departments of knowledge great changes took

place. New methods of scientific enquiry were introduced, which entirely revolutionised the old ideas of nature. Their minds being freed from the pall of gloom which had hung over them for so long, people wandered forth in all directions in quest of adventure, leaving numbers of others behind, possessed with a restless craving to follow them. Such as came back had strange and highly-coloured stories to tell of the encounters they had met with, and of rich fortunes to be made in new and distant lands, which, in spite of exaggerations, could not fail to further stimulate the zeal for discovery in those to whom they related them, so that the very idea of the dull life of the old world became unbearable, and everyone caught the infection of the fever of enterprise that was abroad. Reinvigorated with the spirit of this new life, and seized with an ardent desire to make trial of the unknown, men of every class were leaving the cramped confinement of their old abodes, and striking out into wider spheres of action. This time of Columbus and Vasco da Gama was also that of Cortez and Pizarro, and our own heroes of the same period are too well known to need mention, and so numerous that, if we should begin to give their names, we should never know when to stop.

It was in these "spacious times of great Eliza-

beth," when the name of England was lifted by her naval victories to a height of glory it had never before reached, that the brilliant era, which culminated in the days of Ben Jonson, and which may well be termed the golden age of English drama, was initiated. The dramas belonging to this period may truly be said to have been national in the full sense of the word, for they are in every way intimately connected with the national greatness. No one who has ever felt the invigorating freshness with which they are pervaded, could say that they were uninfluenced by the stirring events which were then happening. Their inherent vitality, which, in spite of their many obvious extravagances, has kept them to this day before the public, was infused into them from the sturdy spirit of independence which then reigned in the minds of the people, and the captivating interest with which they are enlivened was lent from the activity of the surroundings in the midst of which they were composed. It is characteristic of the spirit of the age that the greatest authors who then lived should all be dramatists. It was but natural that the vigorous activity, which was its most prominent feature, should manifest itself in drama rather than in any other form of literature. The national drama and the national greatness went hand in hand. The people awoke

to a consciousness of power, and were full of self-reliance and independence, and simultaneously with these events there occurs a mighty outburst of dramatic activity. From this it is plain that the dramatists did not hold themselves aloof from the people, but drew their inspiration from their patriotic and enterprising spirit.

Similar conditions then prevailed in Spain, a country whose fine national drama has perhaps been somewhat neglected. During this period Calderon composed his famous dramas, which have been the subject of such diverse opinions. It was at this time also that the prolific Lope flourished, the prodigious fertility of whose genius is nothing less than astounding. He is said to have composed over two thousand metrical dramas, besides several epics and other works, which clearly bear the impress of the fervour of excitement caused by the conquests and discoveries in South America and Mexico. From Spain the wave of this dramatic outburst passed over into France, as is shown by the Spanish subject and title of Corneille's well-known drama, "*Le Cid*;" and again the later English drama, in its turn, has been largely influenced by the French.

Comparing now all these instances of dramatic activity, both ancient and modern, with each other, we find that, though the accidental circumstances

vary considerably, yet the essential conditions under which they have occurred have been the same in them all. They have everyone of them been contemporaneous with a revival of national life, consequent upon the removal of some oppressive influence.

It may be asked here why the drama should flourish better when the age of liberty has been immediately preceded by one of oppression. We need not go far to find an answer to this question. For as the blessings of plenty are more fully appreciated by those who have previously experienced the hardships of privation, so the benefits of freedom are more highly prized, and turned to a greater profit, by those who have just been released from the fetters of servitude. No doubt a state of liberty is always favourable to the development of drama. But the same viands set before the hungry and the pampered are not received by them both with the same relish. It is the previous hunger that imparts the zest to appetite, and the temptation to taste derives its strength from the disposition of the mind rather than from the apple on the tree. We never really come to understand the value of a thing till we have known what it is to be without it. A sudden expansion is the natural result of the removal of a weight of oppression ; and, if the one had never

been imposed, we should not have expected to see the other. When the superincumbent pressure is removed, the pent fountains will burst forth in a full stream high into the air ; but, had their waters never been confined, they would have continued for ever to feebly waste themselves away in a trickling and insignificant current. Whatever is compressed within itself possesses a latent tendency to widen out, which it will not fail to exercise on opportunity, as a rubber ball recoils with a greater or less force according to the impetus with which it has been thrown down. It is on such a principle as this that we may explain the effect which opposition sometimes has of further advancing those movements which it seeks to check. The trees which cast off their faded leaves in the autumn renew their garb of green in the spring ; but the leaves of those which are not of a deciduous nature are neither of a fresh green nor of a withered brown, but remain always of one dull hue. That which continually preserves its primal state, unaffected by outward circumstances, prolongs its existence in an undisturbed serenity, but at the same time it manifests no signs of vigorous life.

To sum up, then, the results of our enquiry so far, we conclude that the soil of freedom is that which is best fitted to promote the growth of drama, and the approval of the people is the sun-

shine which brings it to its full development. To place restraints upon their liberty is to place restrictions upon the drama, a thing which it cannot tolerate. For it is to them it looks for its support, drooping under the yoke of their servitude, but reviving in the activity of their independence; and as the vigour of energy among the people is more intense, so the corresponding growth of drama is more exuberant, when the age of liberty has been immediately preceded by one of oppression.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRESENT DRAMA OF NORWAY.

WE now come to consider the latest, though let us hope it may not be the last, outburst of drama, which is now working out its development before our eyes in Norway. This interesting literary phenomenon appeals to us with all the greater force on account of its having been manifested in our own day, and should therefore receive particular attention. Let us then endeavour to ascertain what has been the condition of affairs in this country of late years, disregarding present complications, that we may know whether the surroundings which gave birth to the dramas of Ibsen bear any resemblance to those which existed in the former cases. It will be sufficient for this purpose to trace the sequence of events in Norway from the time that they have been directly connected with this recent dramatic activity, for we have carefully refrained throughout from carrying our historical enquiry any further than is absolutely necessary in order to establish our

case. We shall therefore do no more than give a short outline of her history since the fall of Napoleon, for the details of which we are indebted to the lucid account of a Norwegian contemporary.

For many years previous to this period Norway had been a dependency of Denmark. During the wars in which all Europe was involved after the French Revolution, Denmark had inclined to the side of Napoleon, and had joined the Armed Neutrality against England. In consequence of this policy, the Danes received a heavy blow in the naval engagement of Copenhagen, and some years later were forced to surrender their fleet. Norway was thus cut off from her neighbour, and, owing to the close relations which subsisted between the two countries, she was subjected to constant descents upon her coast, and was at the same time threatened with an invasion from Sweden, which, however, was successfully resisted. All these disasters, in which they had been unavoidably implicated through no will of their own, brought the people to the verge of destitution, and Norway was dragged down with the falling fortunes of the French Emperor. Attacked at once by land and sea, and being unable to effectively withstand the attacks of the stronger Powers, she became much impoverished in her resources.

The great damage which had thus been oc-

casioned to the country, owing to the part she had been compelled to play in these events, caused the people to grow dissatisfied with the Danish Union, from which they were deriving more loss than gain. Indications of this feeling were manifested in many ways throughout Norway. The instinct of patriotism, which had lain dormant for so long, now began to awake, and a movement was set on foot in the direction of national Independence. This agitation continued to make much progress, and was daily assuming larger proportions when, by the terms of the Peace of Kiel, concluded at the beginning of the year 1814, and in accordance with the promise which had previously been given to Bernadotte, Crown Prince of Sweden, to induce him to lend his support to the Allies, Norway was handed over to Sweden, the Danish King being forced to renounce all his claim upon the country.

The news of this compact caused the smouldering fires of discontent, which had been hitherto suppressed, to break out into open flame. The people resented the idea of their country being bartered to further the designs of foreign diplomats. If they had before been dissatisfied at the union with Denmark, they became much more so at the prospect of being reduced beneath the supremacy of Sweden. Representatives of the people met together, and the crown was offered to

the Danish Viceroy, who consented to give up his claim to rule as an absolute monarch, and to grant the country a Constitution of its own. Another meeting was subsequently convened at Eidsvold, where the representatives formally elected the Viceroy King, and settled the terms of this Constitution, which was adopted on the 17th of May 1814, a day memorable in the annals of Norway, and ever afterwards celebrated as the anniversary of her Independence.

The immediate result of this aggressive attitude was to bring about a war with Sweden. The Norsemen, fortunately for themselves, had been left undisturbed while they were completing these arrangements, for Bernadotte was not free to return to Sweden until some time after the Peace of Kiel had been concluded, the Allies having not yet succeeded in driving the French army back upon Paris. But as soon as Napoleon had abdicated, Bernadotte proceeded at once to enforce the King of Sweden's claim upon Norway, which was supported by the Great Powers. The King whom the Norsemen had elected made no strenuous effort to maintain himself on the throne, but the people were determined to preserve their Independence, and repulsed a part of the invading army. The events of the preceding years had made Sweden, like the rest of Europe, unwilling to enter upon a fresh

war, and consequently it was not long before a peace was arranged. The Storthing, or Parliament, having been summoned, elected the King of Sweden as King also of Norway, while he, on his part, consented to recognise the Norwegian Independence, and to rule according to the Constitution which had been adopted at Eidsvold.

In Sweden it was not at first supposed that the terms of this Union would be closely adhered to, the general opinion being that their effect would be merely nominal, but the Norsemen soon made it plain that they were determined they should be rigidly observed. A Bill to abolish the titles and privileges of the nobility was introduced in the Storthing and passed. To this the King at first refused his assent, but when it had been passed by three successive Storthings, he at last allowed it to become law. Hereditary titles and privileges therefore have now been finally abolished in Norway. The Storthing could never have taken up this independent position, unless it had been well supported by the strong popular feeling behind it. The patriotic fervour, which had before begun to manifest itself, was now fairly aroused. The people would doubtless have preferred to be dependent on Denmark than Sweden, and, to prevent this latter contingency coming into effect, they were watchful to stubbornly resist all the King's

pretensions to overstep the limits of his constitutional authority. It was the constant aim of the King to extend his power in Norway, and several attempts were made by him to tamper with the terms of the Union, in order to reduce Norway into subjection to Sweden, but these were all resolutely met and foiled by the fathers of the Norwegian Constitution. The struggle between the two countries chiefly centred in the question of the veto, the King contending that his veto was absolute, while the Storting asserted that it was only suspensive, and up to the present day this dispute still remains undecided.

At this time signs of literary activity first begin to meet our notice. A defiant attitude towards Sweden was fostered in popular verses, the work of Henrik Wergeland and others, which were circulated throughout the country, like the songs current in France during the Revolution, and engendered a patriotic feeling in the minds of the people. The whole community awoke to a consciousness of its national and corporate existence apart from matters of individual concern, and was moved to energetic action in defence of that Independence, in the maintenance of which everyone had an interest at stake.

The King, being alarmed at the rapidity with which this democratic spirit was advancing, de-

terminated to assert his power, and took upon himself to dissolve the Storting. This step led to fresh difficulties, and relations between the two countries again became strained. The Storting at once boldly opposed this new encroachment by impeaching the Minister of State before the Supreme Court of the Realm, and a fine was imposed upon him for having allowed the terms of the Constitution to be violated. The dispute was at last brought to a termination by the King appointing a Norwegian instead of the Swedish Viceroy, thus gaining for himself the goodwill of the people.

The late wars between Germany and Denmark attracted much attention in Norway, the last of which happened immediately prior to Ibsen's hegira, or departure from Christiania in 1864. The sympathies of the people were naturally with the Danes, and a proposal was made to send them assistance. However, though much was said in favour of such an expedition, this movement spent itself in words which produced no practical effect, and a reproachful comment upon this failure to help Denmark in the hour of her need is to be found in Ibsen's works.

The King and the Storting began a great struggle in 1872, which lasted for many years and culminated in a serious crisis, which gave

rise to much bitterness of feeling between the opposing political parties. In this year a Bill to admit Ministers to debates in the Storthing was passed by a large majority, but was vetoed by the King. The introduction of this measure was the outcome of the rise of the peasant class. Formerly the official class had exercised a predominant influence over public affairs ; but as the benefits of education were extended, and as the population of the country increased, it was gradually supplanted by the peasant class, to which the majority of the members of the Storthing now belonged. But the King, who, according to the Prussian system, appoints his own Ministers, selected them from those whose views were antagonistic to the wishes of the people. The result was a minority administration, which naturally produced much dissatisfaction in the country. There was a want of harmony between the executive and the legislative power, and in the face of a hostile Ministry it was impossible for the Storthing to carry out its liberal policy. It became necessary to introduce some amendment into the Constitution, and the Bill we have mentioned was accordingly proposed, with the object of bringing Ministers into closer relations with the people's representatives. It did not, however, find favour with the King, who, by the persistent exercise of his right of veto, resisted

the will of the large majority of the Storting. This condition of affairs lasted for some time, but when the Bill had been passed by three triennial Storthings in succession, the people's representatives contended that it had now become law, on the ground that the King's assent was no longer required, his veto, according to the terms of the Constitution, being only suspensive. On the other hand, the King maintained that the Constitution was a contract between himself and the people of Norway, and could not therefore be altered without his consent, as one of the parties. In consequence of his taking up this position, he claimed an absolute veto in constitutional questions.

It is doubtful whether the Constitution admitted of being viewed in the same light as a legal contract. Every form of government must, in the process of time, undergo some modification. However admirably suited it may be to meet the requirements of the people for whom it is framed, if it does not change with changing circumstances, it will prove an evil legacy to the succeeding generation. But, in any case, national movements are not to be resisted on merely technical grounds. It was unreasonable to expect that a people full of activity would submit to be governed in accordance with a stereotyped Constitution, more especially if

a time of expansion when, had the Government not accommodated itself to the altered condition of the people, it would have seriously hampered their development. To have accepted the King's interpretation would have almost deprived the Storthing of its *raison d'être*, as a legislative body. It therefore, as a last resource, indicted the Ministers before the Supreme Court of the Realm, the result being that they were forced to resign. The King met this move by choosing others holding the same views in their place, but the breach between the peasant and official class, as represented in the Storthing and the Ministry respectively, had now become so wide, that a proper administration of the affairs of the country was impossible, and a deadlock arose in consequence. The situation was now dangerous, and the King, moved by considerations of expediency, made such concessions as satisfied the Norwegian demands, though he still maintained that his interpretation of the Constitution was correct. He summoned a representative Ministry, and allowed the much disputed measure to become law. Thus, after a conflict extending over fourteen years, the liberal policy of the Storthing once more prevailed, and its efforts to introduce reforms were no longer frustrated by the Executive.

From this time up to the present day Norway

has continued to maintain her Independence. Her relations with Sweden, however, have not been always harmonious, and the vexed question of the veto is still far from being satisfactorily settled. The *personnel* of the Storthings during this critical period has included many able and determined men, of whom we may mention in particular the veteran politician Sverdrup, the Norwegian Gladstone, who by his skilful conduct of affairs is credited with having extricated his country from many a dangerous predicament.

The political relations between Norway and Sweden are certainly peculiar. Though nominally united to each other, there is really no connection between them. The only outward and visible sign of union is that which is presented in the person of the King. The Union subsists in him, and but for him would be a nullity. There is a separate staff of officials to each country, except in the case of the consular and diplomatic service, and the King, whose residence is in Stockholm, governs them both through two Ministries, which are totally distinct from one another. The people of Norway evince no disposition to coalesce with their neighbours; on the contrary, they rather ostentatiously hold aloof from them. The prevailing tendency among them is to accentuate the differences in their national usages, and

they purposely avoid reducing them to uniformity with those of Sweden. It is significant, as showing the general opinion on this subject, that it is the custom of the people to commemorate the anniversary of their Independence rather than that of the Union. The feeling of patriotism is very strong throughout the country, and the vigour of the national life has lately displayed itself in many ways. Such is briefly the condition of affairs in Norway at the present day. The separatists command a large majority, both among the people and in the Storting, and lose no opportunity of actively asserting their Independence.

In the midst of these surroundings we are confronted with the appearance of a flourishing Norwegian drama. Surely, then, it is something more than an idle fancy to suppose that both this political and this dramatic activity spring from the one cause! The closer we contemplate them, the more intimately do they appear to be connected; the one presenting us with the external, the other with the internal side of the same national life. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that this outburst of drama in Norway and the celebration of her Independence both commence from the very same day of the month. For what are almost the first words

that meet us as we take up the first of Ibsen's social dramas? We give them simply as we find them, without comment, that everyone may draw the obvious deduction for himself. The drama opens with a meeting of the independent Norwegian citizens, and in the very first speech one of them exclaims,—“Three cheers for the seventeenth of May.”

These words seem to announce the beginning of the new dramatic era, for though the dramas themselves were not actually composed till some time after this date, yet the germs which gave rise to them are contained in the events on account of which it is commemorated. Whatever doubts we may still have felt as to the dependence of drama upon its surroundings, we may finally set at rest by an examination of the works of Ibsen, which abound with traces of the influence of this national revival. The internal evidence which is forthcoming from them proves conclusively that Ibsen, at any rate, is a dramatist who has not arisen by a mere chance. His dramas fill us with a sense of their being invigorated with the bracing air of freedom, and their animated dialogue seems to reflect the present condition of Norway. The awakening of a spirit of patriotism and independence among her people and the development of her drama have been contemporaneous.

All these facts of history afford fresh testimony of a high character in proof of the genuine literary merit of these social dramas, and the strong resemblance which their national environment bears to that which we found to have existed in former instances entirely makes away with the suggestion of their being some spurious counterfeit, which a perverted taste is seeking to foist upon the public. The dramatic activity which is now being manifested in Norway furnishes us with another example to add to the list of cases where the history of literature has repeated itself, and justifies us in laying down as one of the laws which prevail among its phenomena that the same free surroundings which give vigour to the life of the people have also a quickening effect upon the mind of the dramatist, like the benign influence of spring upon a generous soil, and tend to increase his productivity. For this outburst of drama does not wholly proceed from a solitary individual, but is national and general. There are other Norwegian dramatists besides Ibsen, so that, as they do not come before us alone, the appearance of these social dramas cannot be regarded as merely casual and adventitious. Ibsen is not that unaccountable and isolated product of some fortuitous combination of circumstances that some persons would have us imagine. If such had been the case, it

might with some show of reason have been argued that the dramatic gift is sufficient in itself, and places its possessor beyond the reach of external influences. But least of all authors can the dramatist be said to be independent of his national surroundings. It is only when, after the lapse of many years, his admirers come to exalt him by a kind of apotheosis out of his proper sphere, and to endow him with transcendent capabilities, that he appears to be something greater than human. This new movement is not symbolised in one person, but has many ministrants, whose works have contributed to spread its fame abroad, and add lustre to the literature of Norway.

However, though Ibsen is but one voice amidst the chorus which proclaims the advent of this national drama, we may, nevertheless, consider him as being its chief exponent, and those who desire to make its acquaintance will find that his works will provide them with the best introduction. But, in order to see these at their full advantage, it is necessary to meet them in the place where their author intended them to be met, that is, on the stage. Whoever bestows upon his work the title of "drama," thereby shows that he means to present it to the public in the theatre. For all dramas, properly so-called, are primarily composed with a view to their being acted openly before an

audience. They are not given to the world that they should be confined to the study. This cannot be too strongly insisted upon. The stage is the natural environment of all true dramas. For the sake of convenience, they may indeed be abstracted from their proper surroundings, but to do this is to remove them from their native element and transport them into an artificial atmosphere. It is true that there are works, bearing the outward appearance of dramas, which were never intended for public representation. Besides the dramatic poem, before referred to, we may mention also the dramatic dialogue, a convenient form into which to throw certain kinds of prose works, especially such as involve any argument or discussion. But all these numerous off-shoots are quite distinct from the thing itself. It is because of the confused notions that attach to this form of literature that it has befallen it to be sometimes lightly regarded ; but when once we understand its real nature, we are not likely to entertain for it anything but a feeling of respect. Now, as the essential characteristics of drama are to be found in Ibsen's works, we may obtain from them so correct an idea as to the meaning of the term that for the future we shall readily be able to differentiate it from those pseudo-dramas on the one hand, which are as the base excrescences upon

a noble trunk, and, on the other, from those side developments, which, though perfectly legitimate when confined within their proper limits, belong nevertheless to a totally different class.

But since it is better for the mind to be a complete blank than full of false impressions, let us scrupulously avoid all adaptations and contaminated versions of these dramas. We should refuse to see them acted at all, unless they are presented in a translated form which preserves the sense of the original as far as possible, without addition or abridgment. There is no reason why we should be disposed to think little of a good translation, as though it could only produce a comparatively weak effect. The fact of these dramas having been originally composed in another language is really, when we come to consider it, but a slight obstacle between us and them. In the sphere of music, where we have access to foreign works direct, without being obliged to have recourse to any medium like that of translation, we take full advantage of our wide range of selection. All we need is an interpreter, and we might make use of foreign talent to quite as great an extent in the domain of literature. In these days of wide interchange of thought and opinion, the great works of other countries ought to be so easily accessible, that we should be able to lay hands upon them at once in the best form

possible next to the original. This is certain to be one of the advances effected in the near future, and when the importance of this ancillary work of literature becomes generally recognised, it will be more highly cultivated and more systematically conducted.

There is, therefore, no excuse for neglecting these dramas, and if we have a real wish to see them acted, instead of regarding them only as idle topics of the day and subjects for a passing conversation, we may easily gratify it. A little earnestness and enterprise in this matter would give us abundant opportunities of seeing them in their proper surroundings, and of forming an independent judgment for ourselves concerning them. For Ibsen's dramas may be effectively staged without any great effort or outlay, everything connected with their production being as simple as possible. The services of both orchestra and chorus may be dispensed with. No elaborate machinery is required, and the decoration and the other accessories of drama are on the very smallest scale. They should, therefore, be extremely inexpensive to mount. Ibsen never makes excessive use of scenic effects, but accomplishes his ends by purely legitimate means. A true dramatist, he does not divert the attention of his audience from that which is essential to that which is accidental,

but wins its applause by trusting to the words which he puts in the mouths of his characters, and leaving them to produce their own natural effect. The success which his dramas have achieved has nothing in common with the *succès d'estime*, which is more ignominious than failure, but is due to no other circumstance than their own inherent merit.

Seeing, then, that this dramatic activity in Norway is now being exhibited, and is perhaps the chief literary event of our time, it is incumbent upon us to devote our attention to it without delay, and not to put off making the acquaintance of Ibsen's works till they have retired from the modern stage, and passed into the background of history to form food for the meditations of posterity. It is with this valediction that we will now bring this work to a close. For it has not been our intention to offer a mere theoretical disquisition upon the drama, but we have continually had the practical object in view, which we stated at the outset, of exciting a wider interest in the dramas of Ibsen, by clearing away the doubts that seemed to stand between them and the public, in the hope that this might lead to more frequent opportunities being given for meeting with them on the stage. We could have no better means of becoming initiated into the most

characteristic ideas of the present age than those which are afforded us in modern Norwegian literature, and particularly these social dramas. For, owing to the removal of those overshadowing clouds, which for so long a period darkened their vision and acted as a deterrent to the free expression of thought, the people of Norway are now exhibiting an extraordinary activity, and their recent literature includes many great names whose reputation has spread far beyond the limits of their native country. All those burning questions, which, in larger communities, where they are always obscured with a multiplicity of side issues, it is so difficult to understand, are there being fought out to a solution with great enthusiasm in their pure form. Norway to-day presents us, as it were, with a world in miniature, in which we may behold a panorama of modern life on a small scale. The independent position in which her people have suddenly found themselves seems to have sharpened their perceptions, and to have imparted an intensity of thought to their literature, which we shall vainly look for in places where the energies of the inhabitants are more diffused. Because the centre from which this activity radiates forth into Europe is in itself small, Norway being politically insignificant as compared with the Great Powers, we are in danger of failing to recognise its importance,

and of overlooking the prominent part which this country is now taking in the intellectual life of the century. Owing to the great disparity that exists between the population of Norway and that of other European nations, it necessarily cannot compete with them in the quantity of its literary output; but as to the quality of those works which it is giving to the world, it is at present unsurpassed. A population census is no criterion of the merit of a country's literature. The amount of independent thought, which is to be met with in the larger communities, is not so great as might be imagined. Though views and opinions crowd in upon us from every quarter, and the names of different sects and societies are legion, yet it requires but little experience to show that the large proportion of what is offered to us as original work is merely parasitical. For one commanding personality that arises in the literary firmament we find an innumerable company of satellites, who, since they cannot exist alone, are ever seeking to identify themselves with some conspicuous name, which they obscure and bring into discredit, by corrupting and misrepresenting the works on account of which it is held in honour.

We shall do well then not to pronounce judgment upon the present literature of Norway, until we have gained some knowledge of it by internal

examination; and nowhere shall we find the Norwegian character more faithfully reflected than in the dramas of Ibsen. To witness their performance will both give us a clear insight into the nature of drama, and will also cause us to appreciate the true significance of the events and questions which are now occupying the attention of mankind. For this recent Scandinavian drama reveals to us an excellent picture of our own time. Modern thought, in its present stage, draws its best representatives from Norway; and of these the foremost figure is that of Henrik Ibsen.

THE END.

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